
Treasuries of Modern Prose

MODERN SHORT STORIES

by

F. ST. MARS

STANLEY J. WEYMAN

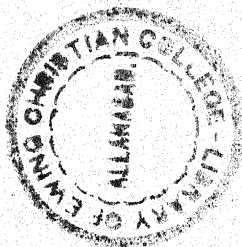
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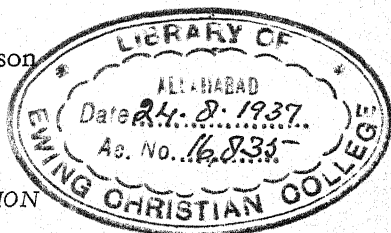
Stanley J. Weyman

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MODERN SHORT STORIES

I

WATCHERS OF THE MUD

F. ST. MARS

I

PEOPLE and poets have praised the dawn as if it had no drawbacks. I do not know why. There is no hour of the twenty-four so dismal as that dread, dead, stagnant hour before the sun rises when the awful wan dawn-haze creeps over things from nowhere special, not dispersing but showing up the darkness, revealing night in a disgraceful manner—stark, pitiless night, stripped of the merciful purple cloak; night unashamed and blatant, cruel, cold, and monstrous.

It was at this time and in such a light that old "Stiletto" Dobson loomed like a blurred smudge out of the surprised and frowning darkness along the top of the sea-wall. He was going eel-spearing; at least, he carried a thing like Neptune's trident, which, by those who go down to the mud of the estuary to earn their daily bread, is said to be used for no other purpose.

People do not go eel-spearing for fun, you understand. It is not the kind of thing one would do unless one were forced. Also, it is a lonely business. It consists in plunging about in the mud-slime of the

estuary in pursuit of eels. It is essentially a trade of the very poor—of, in fact, the marshmen, who are a race in themselves, and whose fathers and fathers' fathers were the old fowlers that we read about, and smugglers too at times.

"Stiletto" Dobson was, or appeared to be, an exception to the rule. Eel-spearing seemed to do him well, and, to use his own expression, he liked himself nicely on it.

He was a small, lithe, quick, black-and-tan terrier of a man, with smooth, effortless, swift motion, a soft voice, and eyes that shone like gulls' eyes. He appeared to divide his time between eel-spearing, wild-fowl shooting, and sleeping. One presumes he ate; but if any one ever saw him eat, the fact has not been left on record. If one judged by his white hair and quite a thousand wrinkles, he was an old man. On the other hand, if one judged him by his eyes and his manner, he was young. No one had ever seen him engage in anything else than the occupations named; he was known to have inherited nothing, and in his young, or perhaps I should say more youthful days it is on record that he was as poor as the rest of his race. But his daughters did not "go to service," nor did they work at a laundry. Mrs. Dobson had been seen in a real silk dress; and, greatest proof of all that he was rich, old Dobson paid for his gun and his dog licence every year, and "never asked no one for a fill," which is a pipeful of tobacco.

The nickname of "Stiletto" was a remnant of his wild and youthful days, and of an affray with knives, out of which he had emerged with a scar over his left eye and the present Mrs. Dobson as his reward.

"Stiletto" Dobson made his way along the sea-wall with the short, quick strides affected by all his breed. The light brightened at every stride, and redshanks flew up from the marsh on his left, and fled, crying, "Tyo! tyo!" Stiletto called them "cussed tooks," because they advertised his presence. Anon he came to some deserted oyster-beds, to build which some "company" had been floated, gone smash, and fled to America; while the place itself had been pretty well floated out by the tides again. Here the concrete blocks of the wall had been broken and torn asunder and cast all ways by the water, and here, in a cave formed by these blocks, Dobson halted. Presently he began to burrow like a rat among the pebbles and the rubbish, till suddenly he struck tin. In fact, he unearthed cases of tin to the number of five, and all of them packed full of tobacco. That, however, was his cousin's business, the tobacco being smuggled, and destined later to be taken inland. What concerned him now was another matter altogether.

Beside the square cases lay some long, thin ones. They were not big, and looked as if they might hold any little innocent things, such as umbrellas, for instance. Now, if any one had told old Dobson that each of those cases held two Lee-Enfield military magazine-rifles, no one would have looked more shocked and surprised than he. Nevertheless, that was precisely what they did hold. Seeing that two great Powers were at that moment at issue with one another, magazine-rifles were fetching their weight in gold at the time. These rifles might, if smuggled out of the country secretly, be of value. At least, that

was the hypothesis upon which Mr. Dobson appeared now to be working. One of those Powers, at any rate, was willing to pay almost anything for good rifles and ammunition. Dobson wrapped some old sacking round one case, shouldered it with his trident, so that to the casual eye it might appear to be part of his paraphernalia for the capture of the elusive eel, and, with bare feet and trousers tucked up to his knees, boldly squelched out on to the mud.

Now and then he would stop to probe with his spear at the mud, in the orthodox fashion used by eel-fishers. From the shore the action looked natural enough, and one so familiar to the coastguard half a mile away, watching things in general through his telescope, that he did no more than favour the old man with a passing glance. Had that coastguard known that there were, in point of fact, no eels where Dobson was dibbling, and, further, that Dobson knew there were none, he might have taken more interest in the matter. But he did not know, and that is why old Dobson manœuvred, always spearing zealously, until he reached a small island of gravel and marram grass well out in the middle of the estuary. Here he hid the two rifles, at a spot specially chosen beforehand, and forthwith speared his way back to shore again.

Six times did "Stiletto" Dobson manage, always apparently by chance, to spear his way from shore to that island. He never approached the island from the same point, of course; and once he spent half-an-hour in spearing eels in real earnest, just to make things look all correct; and each time did he

convey to, and hide two rifles on, that island. It was very neatly done indeed.

When it was all over he returned to his hiding-place, half filled his eel-basket with tobacco—it was a singularly capacious eel-basket, by the way—placed the few slimy eels he had caught on top, slung all over his back, and started with his little, quick stride on the home journey. The tobacco, it may be remarked, was to go into England, the rifles to go out, and the handling of both was a dangerous business.

It was some fifteen minutes later, just as he rounded a bend and came in sight of a rotten old wooden quay where all the villagers' boats lay, that "Stiletto" Dobson got his first shock. A group of marshmen were gathered round the head of the quay. Many of them, like Dobson, had evidently come in from eel-spearing, carrying their baskets on their backs. That was nothing, however. It was the smudges of blue—Royal Navy serge—among them that made Dobson catch his breath. There was no less a person than Mr. Fox, Chief Officer of Coastguards for the station, accompanied by two men. That they were on duty he knew, because he saw their sword-sticks. Heaven, the Admiralty, and their quiet, alert selves alone knew what they wanted, though.

Stiletto did not pause, not being a fool. Also, he was already too close to risk turning back. He drew a deep breath, shut his teeth together with an audible snap, and kept straight on. And it seemed as if the basket on his back had got suddenly as heavy as lead. Stiletto was distinctly unhappy, for which reason, perhaps, he assumed a gay smile, and broke forth into song after the custom of all eel-spearers when at work.

Nicholas Fox, Chief Officer of His Majesty's Coastguards for the station at the village of Quigley Harbour, had evidently been stirred up considerably by something, and his bearings were heated, as it were. As a matter of fact, he had received an imperative message from the Admiralty, informing him that large quantities of contraband goods were leaking into the country, and, what was worse, that a friendly Power had urgently represented to His Majesty's Government the fact that still larger quantities of modern arms and ammunition were leaking out of the country into the hands of that friendly Power's enemies. It was not known on what part of the coast the smuggling was taking place, but it would not be well for that chief officer in whose district the leakage was allowed to continue. Apparently the Government had cussed the Admiralty, the Admiralty had cussed the coastguards, and the coastguards, in terror for their billets, were exercising their right to examine everything brought on shore, from a winkle up to a fishing-smack. And here was "Stiletto" Dobson, pitchforked by fate into the very centre of the whole stirred-up hornets' nest.

It was a beautiful situation, and it was not made any the more interesting from the villagers' point of view by the sight of Squire Quigley, J.P., in the centre of the crowd, keeping a hard, cold grey eye upon people in general.

"Stiletto" Dobson hurried up to the sullen group as if he was anxious to witness the fun, instead of wishing himself anywhere else in the wide world.

"What's t' matter?" he queried of a Voice that

lived inside a pair of huge terra-cotta trousers such as fishermen affect.

"Ye've got t' be searched, I reckons, like t' rest of us. So naw ye knaws, dan't ye?" replied the Voice.

Stiletto smiled, and the Squire, turning that moment, noticed the smile, for it was not quite an ordinary smile. A close observer would have seen that each time he smiled Stiletto solemnly shut his left eye. It was not a wink. If one had not seen him smile often without doing it, one would have said it was a "trick" he had. It might have been a sign or a signal.

"Hullo, Dobson! Earning an honest living for a change, eh? Glad to see you haven't been poaching my duck—what? Give you a week's imprisonment next time you come up before me, my man," shouted Squire Quigley.

Dobson smiled and touched his cap. He and Squire Quigley had been at war for years over the matter of poaching, and the usually good-hearted Squire's bitter enmity against the man was a byword of the district. This was the first time the tall, powerful blonde-bearded gentleman had spoken to the little man for two years.

The searching of the boats—the little turtle-backed gunning-punts—continued in a sullen silence. The coastguards worked with the slow, ordered haste which is peculiar to our navy and to naval men. They did the thing thoroughly, being fearful for their posts, overlooking nothing, tapping here, poking there, examining and turning out all things under their leader's quick, penetrating, brown eyes.

At last, when there were only Dobson and one more man left to be examined, the Squire deliberately stretched his arms and yawned.

"Well, Fox," he remarked, "don't seem to have made much of a catch—eh? Sort of a mare's nest—what? Think I will get away and dress for dinner."

He turned away, and then, seeming to recollect something, came back.

"Have any of you men some eels to sell?" he asked. "Weakness of mine, you know. Like 'em for breakfast," he went on, turning to the coastguard officer as if in explanation.

Two or three men offered him their catch, but he called to Dobson, who had made no move.

"Here, my man. No one shall say I am not just, or that I boycott any fellow. I'll give the devil his due for once, and buy your eels, just to encourage you in honest paths, though I expect I shall be harbouring the fox that eats my pheasants, or duck rather—eh, what? How many have you there?"

Dobson "'lowed" that there were "'bout six," and the company were properly impressed when the Squire gave him five shillings and took the basket.

"No, I am not a proud man," Squire Quigley muttered, weighing the basket. "One of the old school, Fox. Don't mind dirty hands.—You can call for the basket in the morning, Dobson.—Good-night, Fox. Glad you find all my people honest." And he turned away with that deliberate, heavy stride which is the mark of the wielders of the law in general, and of Englishmen in particular.

"Stiletto" Dobson watched the retreating broad back with a grimace indicative of nothing in particular

save blankness. He felt as if some one had poured a bucket of cold water upon his stomach. He was wondering vaguely what sort of a volcano would open up when the Squire found that which was hidden below the eels in that basket.

Mr. Fox was watching the broad back also, but his thoughts were different. He was thinking that he ought to have searched that basket, but—well, the Squire was what is known as a “funny” man, good-natured, but quick-tempered and intolerant of interference. “Anyway,” thought Mr. Fox, “he will be as good a searcher as any, perhaps, being a J.P.”

“That’s done ut,” whispered Dobson’s cousin in his ear. “I knawed ye’d somethin’ on ye when I sees ye smile th’ pass smile. Better ’ide, Stiletto, I reckon.”

Stiletto said nothing. He waited till the coast-guards left, then went openly to his cottage. But he never entered the cottage. He went in at the front-gate and out at the back through the garden hedge. He fetched a circle of one mile through lonely fields, and returned to the oyster-beds afore mentioned. Here, in the centre of the beds, were the old factory and the house of the manager. The place was now tumbling to decay, but was still water-tight. In its way it was a strategic position, for none could approach the place except along one of the narrow walls dividing each oyster-bed from others, and in doing so he would be in full view of the house.

“Stiletto” Dobson entered the silent, echoing place, stepping like a cat. He passed to an old fireplace, before which the manager had, no doubt,

sat at his ease on winter evenings. He felt at a hole in the wall where once the grate had been bolted in, and, lo ! even as he slipped his fingers into the cavity the whole concern revolved on its hinges, revealing two steps downwards, and a little room, a tiny room, quite dry and comfortably furnished, taking its light from an aperture in the chimney farther up !

It was evident that whoever organised this gang of modern smugglers, or, as they preferred to be called, contraband runners, knew what he was about. As a matter of fact, they did not know who was their leader. None of them had ever seen him. His name was represented merely by a mark, a sign. Presumably he lived in London. They did not know. He gave his orders to deputies through a speaking-tube, and they conveyed them verbally to the marshmen who did the work. The dividing of the profits, the planning, the sale of the contraband, all was the work of that mysterious leader whom no one had ever seen, and yet who seemed to know so much, even to the doings of every man employed.

"Stiletto" Dobson had gone into hiding simply because he expected that within a few hours at the least the Squire would discover the smuggled tobacco in his eel-basket, and in consequence the country would be raised against him. His wife gave out that he had gone on a cruise in a fishing-smack. She knew what to say, that good woman—had had to say it before, in fact. What, after all, would have been more natural for such a man than to go on a fishing cruise ?

Therefore, when his cousin arrived—on his hands and knees mostly—just before dawn, with

provisions for the exile, and reported that nothing had transpired, Dobson scratched his lean head and looked worried.

"'Pend upon ut, they're layin' low. I knows th'm. They think they're goin' t' catch I by keepin' quiet. I sees their little game," he said.

And his cousin—a sour-faced, bullet-headed, clean-shaven man—nodded in wise concord. "Sez I to myself, sez I, yew go careful. Th'm goin' to lie low," he admitted. "So I come four mile roun' in case old Fox's men be followin' of me."

But when a week had gone by and nothing happened, Dobson's perplexity changed to fear. He could not remain in a secret chamber, six feet by eight, all his life, he said. The natural energy of the man began to run to impatience, as a lettuce runs to seed. Every other day his cousin arrived with supplies and no news—that was the terrifying part of it. The Squire went about with his natural face and his customary manners; Mr. Fox and his men did no more; it was inconceivable.

At last Stiletto came out. He could bear the hiding no longer. He kept to his cottage at first, but as weeks wore on and nothing happened, he commenced to steal out and get about his business. For one thing, the barge which stole up the deserted harbour from time to time, ostensibly to load gravel, and, during the dark hours, removed the rifles from Dobson's hiding-place on the little island afore mentioned out into the Channel where she transhipped them, ammunition and all, to a big tramp-steamer whose business it was to carry them half across the world to the place where they were urgently

needed—this barge was beginning to get impatient. She wanted more rifles. She got them at last ; for Dobson, emboldened by the inaction of the Squire, fell to work again, and—nothing happened.

II

It cannot be said that Mr. Fox was very pleased. He was a man who loved ease, and he got it not in those autumn days that followed after the events set forth in the last chapter. The Admiralty informed him more urgently than ever that he was neglecting his duty—he and several others, for it was only vaguely guessed that the contraband was being run from the south coast—that the friendly Power had again made urgent representations regarding the gun-running.

“Holy Moses!” exclaimed Mr. Fox, banging the telegraph instrument with his fist. “Do they think I grow ’em in my back-garden, then?”

But he flung on his coat and ordered his men—there were twelve on the station—to turn out, sword-stick and all. Six he ordered to patrol the shore of Quigley Harbour southwards to its mouth, and six he took with him northwards towards the oyster-beds. Contrary to the usual method, however, he ordered his men to patrol inland on their way out, and along the shore on their return journey. Thus any smugglers flying from the one party might reasonably be expected to run into the arms of the other.

It was a foggy, though moonlight, night, cold and still. Mr. Fox argued that this was a good night for smuggling, and if any were going on in his district—

and he was not yet certain even of that—this might be a good time to endeavour to discover it. He had no fixed plan, beyond the steady patrolling of the harbour, and not the slightest suspicion of "Stiletto" Dobson and his relations.

And Stiletto was moving along the shore surreptitiously a mile ahead of them at that very moment.

On his back Stiletto was carrying some three hundred rounds of solid-drawn brass cartridges. They had that evening come down by motor-car from London, two thousand rounds in all, and it was Stiletto's business to convey them from the corn-stack with a hollow inside in which they were hidden out to the little island on the mud, where they would be called for by gravel-barge later.

It was not in itself a very difficult task. The wild-duck were in, and Stiletto carried his heavy 8-bore gun slung across his back. He was a well-known wild-fowler, and none would challenge his presence here with his gun, provided always that he kept to the foreshore and was not actually seen with the heavy cartridge-cases on his back. As to that danger, he trusted to his ears to warn him of any one approaching along the shingle, and he had several hiding-places for the cartridges made along his route in case of a mishap.

One thing only he had not reckoned upon. Mr. Fox had ordered his men, as has been said, contrary to general custom, to start their beat on each side from the extreme end, and to work their way back along the shore, instead of out along the shore, as usual, thus causing the two parties to converge upon each other, and join at a place near the ruined oyster-beds.

Thus it happened that "Stiletto" Dobson, hurrying before the sound of approaching footsteps in his rear, suddenly found himself running into the arms of similar sounds in front, and came to a halt with a groan.

Luckily for him, in that great silence which lives on the desolate estuary when there is no wind, sound carries a long way. The two patrols approaching along the shore from opposite directions were yet some distance off. On the other hand, "Stiletto" Dobson happened just to be caught between two of the alternative hiding-places he had made for his contraband in case of need. He dared neither to go back to the one nor forward to the other. The position was, therefore, somewhat lugubrious, and did not give Stiletto any pleasure at all. He swore profanely.

There was only one thing for it—he must bolt straight across the oyster-beds to the old factory. If he could do that, and hide the cartridges in the secret room, he could face anybody with his antiquated wild-fowl gun on his shoulder and a smile on his face.

For a moment Dobson halted to listen. Then his face hardened, and he started to run. The other people were running now also. They must have heard him.*

His course lay at right angles to the seawall along a path between the oyster-beds which was lower than it. It was no pleasure of Dobson's that the mist should choose that moment to thin slightly, however, and let down a filtering moon-haze. A redshank—that curse of all wild-fowlers—leapt up from somewhere on the shimmering mud, yelling fiendishly "Tyop! tyop!" as it fled. It was enough to give him away and mark his course, even if a curlew

had not finished the job, a moment later, by racing into the dark, a vision of great wings, leaving behind a long-drawn, wailing cry of "Cour-lip ! cour-lip !"

"Cussed tooks !" muttered "Stiletto" Dobson, and a shout sounded from the sea-wall. He had been seen.

But this meant more than the mere fact. It meant also that in all probability he had been seen to be laden with something, not clearly, perhaps, but enough for those who followed to couple with the fact that he was running away, and draw fairly correct conclusions.

The faint blurs of men racing along the sea-wall faded out in mist as he glanced back, for they had to run some way at right angles to his course before hitting the direct path.

The coastguards gained quickly. He could hear the steady thud, thud, of that ordered trot which is called a "double," and means discipline all the world over. He turned the corner of the echoing, deserted building, his breath coming in great gasps, his knees bent and almost giving out, his eyes starting.

And a shout, a challenge, calling him to halt, sounded not a hundred yards behind.

"Stiletto" Dobson stumbled blindly into the pit-like darkness of the first room he came to. It was not the right room ; not the room with the revolving fireplace and the secret room behind it which meant safety. Not the right room at all ; but that was round another corner, and he had no time, even if he had had the strength, to get to it—which I doubt.

Here in this room, however, in the earth, below the gaping boards of the floor, was a hole, without a top or any fancy device, which Dobson had now and then used to store odds and ends in. It was a poor

enough hiding-place for contraband ammunition, and was sure—quite sure—to be discovered by the coastguards when they instituted that terrible, ordered search which he knew would follow upon his capture. But it must serve. At the present it would give him time, say a few minutes, in which to think.

Gropingly in the blackness, he bundled the cases of cartridges into the hole—he could have found it blindfold, I fancy—and scraped some plaster and rubbish over it with his hands.

Then he stopped and “froze,” and there followed that silence which comes when one disturbs a rat which is gnawing in a room. Something had moved *inside* the room, something surreptitious and menacing.

Dobson listened between laboured gasps. Outside, only ten yards from the door, the coastguards were running and shouting, and “Stiletto” Dobson half rose. Then he went down again with a thud and a sob of outdriven breath. Something, some one, had sprung upon him from within the room—from behind.

There was a flash of lights, the sound of a frenzied wordless struggle, the gleam of Mr. Fox’s pocket electric lamp, the beating of shod feet on bare boards, and a thousand echoes running allwhither into the heart of the deserted factory—the weird cries of rudely awakened wild-fowl in the darkness without, and—silence.

“Stiletto” Dobson, as in a dream, looked up into the keen, grey eyes of Squire Quigley only six inches above his own. The Squire had him on his back, his great weight pressing down the little,

squirming smuggler as the weight of a bulldog pins a stoat. The Squire's great hands held Dobson's wrists as in a vice ; his flaxen beard brushed the little man's white locks. Dobson saw the ring of blue-clad men around him, saw the bar-like gleam of the drawn sword-sticks, heard the sharp order from Mr. Fox to close in. Then the Squire rose.

"Poaching as usual," he said, in his deep, ringing voice.

"Pardon me, Squire," put in Mr. Fox, stepping forward. "I claim the prisoner on a much more serious charge than that."

Squire Quigley raised one finely arched eyebrow in mild surprise ; but there was a touch of haughtiness in it that might have stung a quieter man than Fox.

"Indeed, Fox!" he answered. "And may I ask what that is?"

"Smuggling," was the curt reply.

Squire Quigley sat himself down slowly—ay, on the very rubbish which covered Dobson's hastily hidden cartridges sat he. He opened his cigarette-case and carefully chose and lit a cigarette. Then, still with one eyebrow haughtily raised, he looked at the six coastguards and their officer and the gleam of steel among them ; he looked at the lithe little form of "Stiletto" Dobson covered in dust, sitting forlornly on the rotting floor. Then—and then he burst into a mighty roar of laughter, that ran through the empty rooms and set the web-encumbered rafters rocking to a thousand echoes, and awoke the gulls on the mud-banks outside, so that they set up a clamour of answering cries singularly like mocking laughter out in the night there.

"Fox," he cried, "you amuse me infinitely, you and your smuggling bogey-man. I've known this old rascal here"—and he pointed to Dobson with a huge outstretched arm, still shaking with laughter—"some twenty years. Clever poacher I know him to be; a leader of poachers I suspect he is; but a smuggler? Oh, name of twenty fiends! Why, you're going back to the days of our great-great-grandfathers, Fox. I shall fine this man for poaching next week. Smuggling be sugared!" And the Squire slapped his huge thigh, and rocked with the crazy building to the tune of his own laughter.

Mr. Fox bit his lip. "But I have private information leading me to suspect him of gun-running," he snapped, savage that he was being thus laughed at like a child before his men. "We saw him running away laden with heavy packages."

"My poor wild-duck, you mean," cut in the Squire.

"No; packages of weight. Cartridges—Lee-Enfield cartridges. They must be hidden here now," fairly shouted Mr. Fox in his anger.

"Cartridges! Oh dear! oh dear!" The Squire burst out afresh in another bull-like roar. Then he suddenly sobered down. "But seriously, Fox," he said, "one can hardly credit such things in these days of the twentieth century."

"But I can and will prove it," burst out the commander of the coastguards, now fairly well jumped out of his grooves, as it were.

"Prove it, then!" snapped the Squire suddenly. "I have been Squire of Quigley for twenty-five years, and I ought to know something of my own people.

I am, in a way, responsible for them. I defy you, Fox, to prove your charge."

Mr. Fox was by this time white in the face with suppressed rage, all the more venomous because before such a great man as the Squire it had to be suppressed.

"Search!" he commanded, swinging round to his men, and spitting out the single word like a cat that has been unwittingly trodden upon. And they—the six that were with him, and the other six who had just come up—searched with that peculiar, dread, ordered thoroughness which marks our coastguards.

Every board of wall and floor was tapped; every yard of ground the pursuit had covered was gone over at least twice; every foot of mud on either hand was rigidly examined. From head to heel they overhauled Dobson; from sea-wall to ruined factory they worked the ground again, and from floor to roof they ferreted the factory. And all the time Squire Quigley sat upon the heap of rubbish that covered those fatal cartridges, and rocked with laughter or snorted with rage, as the fit took him; and Stiletto stood between two armed coastguards, and wondered if he was dreaming or drunk, or if this was some insane nightmare, from which he would presently awake to find the dawn streaming in at his window.

At last the men gathered in the room where the Squire was still seated. Mr. Fox stood in the doorway, pulling his beard and gazing at Dobson as one who could save him from a very awkward position if he could only be forced to speak.

"Well?" asked the Squire.

"Nothing," was the curt reply.

And Squire Quigley gave an odd laugh that made Dobson turn and look at him. It would almost have appeared as if the Squire were on his side, had he not known from bitter experience what a hard man, a "stickler for justice," the Squire had always shown himself to be.

When the Squire spoke, however, there could be no doubt as to his attitude in the matter. "Dobson," he said sharply, "this matter of smuggling or no smuggling is no concern of mine. You are released under suspicion. I also release you under suspicion of poaching; but I warn you that the next time you will not be likely to escape so easily. You have been fined for poaching often enough. You go to prison upon the next occasion. You can go, so far as I am concerned.—How about you, Fox?"

"Yes," growled Mr. Fox, "we can find nothing. He can go; but I am certain in my own mind nevertheless. I think we will go also, sir. We are disturbing your flight-shooting."

The Squire turned and took up his favourite hammerless gun. "Well, I must confess I do not care for my preserves to be disturbed too much, but you have your duty, naturally," he remarked. "Call in at the Hall on your way home, and tell them I said you and your men can do with refreshment. Goodnight."

He rose as he spoke and strode out behind the officers of the Crown. Dobson had already departed, but not far; he was hiding in the tamarisks barely three hundred yards away. He saw the coastguards depart one way and the Squire another. A double shot some distance off ten minutes later told him where

the sportsman was located, and he crept back to the ruined factory and removed those deadly cartridges before dawn. It was too risky to leave them there. Perhaps Mr. Fox might take a fit into his head to return and make a private search on his own.

Indeed, as "Stiletto" Dobson entered his back-door in the lone, cold grey of dawn some hours later, Mr. Fox, all alone, came to the ruined factory, and began a careful investigation of the place, which lasted him two hours, and told him nothing at all.

III

It was a cold, hard, blustering evening some three weeks after "Stiletto" Dobson had been so nearly caught over that little matter of the cartridges. Stiletto was sitting by the fire in his cottage, holding up to the blaze his small feet, clad in those long grey stockings which all men wear who go to their work in heavy sea-boots. Evidently he was settling down to an evening of ease and a laborious read of the paper. Stiletto read after a style of his own, a slow process involving much movement of the lips and pondering over long words.

Then the garden gate creaked (it always creaked if any one entered by it; Stiletto had seen to that), and Stiletto's cousin, Alby Dobson, strode in at the door. He was not alone, however; another and a different breed of man accompanied him—one well dressed, keen-faced, dark-visaged.

"It is for to-night," remarked the newcomer at once, as one who is accustomed to give orders. "I have brought them in my motor-car. You will get them to the island before morning. There will be

four of you—not working together, you understand, for that will increase the risk, but independently. It is the last lot—the completion of the contract. Tomorrow you draw your money enough to keep you, without—er—running contraband, for your life. There.” He flung out a lean brown hand as he spoke. “Those are the chief’s last orders. I had it in his own voice this afternoon. He thanks you all. You have worked well, and deserve your reward—especially you, Dobson.”

Stiletto sat bolt-upright and reached for his heavy sea-boots, never far from him. He was a man quick of action, as most soft-spoken men are, and economical of speech.

“Ah,” he said, “that chief who none of us knows, and nobody ’ave ever see’d. Just an order through a tube” (but he pronounced it “toob”), “and there ye are. Just a voice, as one might say. ’E ain’t no fool, ’ooever ’e m’ be. But I wonder ’oo t’ gracious he is.”

“Ah,” laughed the stranger, sitting down, not without grace, and lighting a cigarette, “many have wondered that, my friend, and will. Even I do not know—I who am his chief deputy—and never shall.” He turned slowly and gazed out of the tiny window at the threshing trees. “He may be a native of this town, or of Jericho, or New York. We may see him and speak to him daily, for aught we know”; and he made with his finger-nail on the cloth the sign thus, [↑]_↑—the treble-barbed arrow-head, by which this chief of smugglers, who preferred to remain nameless, was known to his men.

"Stiletto" Dobson pulled on his heavy boots thoughtfully.

"It'll be dark in fifteen minutes," he remarked. "And t' wind'll drop with t' tide. Like as not, if fog comes on, as it may, Mr. Fox'll be tryin' on some o' 'is fancy games, but I ain't afraid o' 'e. So naw ye knaws." And he made a gesture with his free hand indicative of the wiping of Mr. Fox off the earth.

The deputy rose with a laugh, and, shaking hands, departed. It would appear that, though a gentleman, he loved the game, for itself.

Fifteen minutes later Dobson and his cousin left the cottage and went different ways. Half-an-hour afterwards Dobson alone arrived at the shore of the estuary, burdened with his first load of cartridges, and pushed off in his shallow, turtle-backed, cigar-shaped, flat-bottomed gunning-punt, ostensibly to go wild-fowling.

The wind, as he had prophesied, was falling swiftly with the tide. There was no moon as yet, and the silence was the silence of a desert or the boundless ocean. Save for the occasional, sudden, sword-like whistle of wild-ducks' wings overhead, or the passing bugle-like clamour of a "gaggle" of wild-geese, there was no sound. It was just the night for smuggling, gun-running, and other questionable and risky occupations that thrive not in the light of day.

"Stiletto" Dobson had made four journeys, carrying the cartridges on his back from the place where they were hidden in the hollow wheat-stack a quarter of a mile or so to the shore, where he placed them in his gunning-punt and rowed them on the falling tide to the little island out in the middle of the

estuary. Here, before dawn, a gravel-barge would come, ostensibly to dig gravel—a common enough practice on these harbours—and would take the cartridges out into the English Channel, where they would be transhipped to a steamer whose business it was to run the gauntlet of the friendly Power's cruisers and deliver them where they were most urgently needed, as has already been explained. Dobson saw by the sinking of the piled-up cases within the stack that his companions were working swiftly, as he was himself, each independently from a different point. And now this was the last journey. In his punt he carried the last load.

He noted as he pushed off from the shore, and paddled out craftily on muffled oars, that the wind had dropped, and left a mist fast thickening to a fog. The tide, too, had fallen; there was barely seven inches of turgid water beneath his flat-bottomed punt, though farther out, towards the main channel of the estuary, there would still be water enough. Banks of oozy, glistening mud loomed here and there out of the fog, ghostly and menacing shadows. Far away a single pounding report rang out suddenly, denoting where Dobson's cousin "Alby" was making pretence to shoot wild-fowl. And Dobson lifted his gun suddenly and fired at a shadowy flock of widgeon at that moment crossing the moon. A dull splash not far ahead told the smuggler that one, at any rate, of that flock would feed on the still, steely reaches no more. He, too, would tell all whom it might concern that he was plying his legitimate trade.

Then, after picking up the widgeon, he rowed

on in silence through the fog. Once or twice he turned his head uneasily. He had a sort of feeling that he was being followed. There were now and then faint splashings in the murk of the fog, but these might have been made by fish—or, again, they might not.

Slowly he made the main channel of the estuary, and turned up it towards the island. In spite of the moon, it was impossible to see anywhere more than a few yards ahead because of the fog.

Suddenly Dobson stopped rowing and "backed water." The birds were coming towards him; flock after flock whistled past quite close, or shied at sight of him and beat upwards overhead. A boat was being rowed down the channel in his direction, frightening up the birds as it came. Nay, more; he felt almost certain now that some one was behind him, too. The sudden cries of the birds a few seconds after they had passed him would suggest that. Perhaps it was his own cousin, however. He knew no coastguard could follow him over the shallow way by which he had come.

They who approached from ahead were different though. No mere punt this, he knew, by the confusion among the fowl. Moreover, they came quickly—so quickly that in a few seconds he could hear the beat of oars—that short, regular beat which no seaman can mistake; it was the stroke affected by the Royal Navy. They who came were rowing "navy stroke"—were, in fact, coastguards.

Dobson spun his light craft about as a whirligig beetle spins in a puddle, and raced up a narrow side-channel, away towards the land. He fled into the arms of the gathering fog, but as he went he heard

a sharp hail, inviting him to heave-to at once, and the strokes of the approaching oars quickened furiously.

He knew that he was being pursued by the coast-guard cutter, and he did not accept the invitation to stop. He removed, over a mud-bank and up the small channel, towards land. The boat of the law, being larger, had to make a short detour and strike the mouth of the channel where it ran into the main one lower down, but the inspiring way in which she took the bend and came hissing up into the straight left no doubt as to which was the faster boat. The coastguard cutter, manned by six men, was overhauling the unseen, flying Dobson at every stroke, cutting down his four hundred yards start at every minute.

He might certainly have thrown the incriminating ammunition overboard, but that would have served him little. There was scarcely two feet of water under his punt now, even in the little channel. Soon there would be less. In an hour it would be almost dry. The abandoned cartridge-boxes would stick up out of the water like milestones out of snow. The approaching coastguards were not blind—they must see them; and even if they did not, they would institute a search, and quickly find them. It must be remembered, indeed, that he had fled, fox-like, on the first alarm. Wild-fowlers with a good conscience do not do that. There would be questions asked which he could not answer. Moreover, he was a suspected man already.

Suddenly "Stiletto" Dobson stuck his oars hard down in the water, and slid across the channel

on a wild "cant," "backing water" for dear life. A long, low, shadowy shape—another punt—had shot out from behind a mud-bank close ahead. Driven by strokes the power of which would have been a marvel if there had been any time to think about it, the punt fairly hissed towards him. So far as Dobson knew, only one man could row like that, or would dare to do so, on these treacherous waters, and that man was Squire Quigley. It *was* Squire Quigley.

Stiletto gave a gasp, and bent hurriedly outboard to fend off the Squire's punt and avert a collision.

"Got your pattens?" muttered Squire Quigley hurriedly.

Dobson nodded. He had still got his hand half raised to strike a blow and avoid a capture.

"Then put them on, man—quick! Winged two geese, and they've flapped across the mud to the big pool close inshore there;" and he pointed with his huge hand to where the sea-wall might be. "Not enough water for my punt," he continued, jerking out his words gruffly and in an enormous hurry. "Fetch them for me, Dobson, before they get too far. I will stand by your punt."

"Stiletto" Dobson, taken completely by surprise as he was, was thinking quickly. Here was a chance to get away, it seemed. There had appeared no hope of escape till then. The pursuers were scarcely two hundred yards behind now. In any case the contraband must be captured, he knew, and far better to let it be captured without him, he thought.

In an instant he was hurriedly knotting the rough cords by which he bound the "pattens," or mud-

shoes, to his feet. He did not speak. In fact, there was no time for words. He just nodded his assent, swung himself outboard, and splashed his way off with great sucking strides in the direction which the Squire had said the wounded geese had taken. He knew the mud-locked pool the gentleman meant well enough—had often shot duck there himself; but he did not pause beside it; he fled straight on towards land. In a few seconds his slim, bent form merged into the deepening fog, and he vanished utterly, swallowed up in the hazy pall and the fine, smothering silence of the night.

In his hurry he had not paused to think—which was just as well, perhaps, for had he done so, he must have remembered that he had not heard the report of the Squire's gun at all, and he could not have avoided hearing it if that gentleman had fired.

As for the Squire, long before Dobson was out of sight he was already feeling purposefully in the wild-fowler's punt, and removing with incredible swiftness the cases of cartridges to his own. The Squire's punt, be it said, was different from Dobson's in that there were lockers—secret lockers, opened only by a spring—filling the whole of the turtle-back space fore and aft. In these places he hid the cases of cartridges. Then, with a titanic blow of his gun-butt, he drove a hole clean through the bottom of Dobson's punt and sank it in a deep pool in the channel which he knew of from often having caught some large fish in that very spot; for, next to shooting, he loved fishing better than anything. Three huge stones taken from the mud around he placed in the well where Dobson sat to row, in

order to keep the punt down. It was thus submerged completely, hidden from view, and would remain so in the hole even at low tide.

Then the Squire swung his own punt slant-ways across the channel, fired two shots into the air at nothing, pulled two dead wild-duck out from under his seat and placed them in the water, and, with great deliberation and much flapping of the dead ducks' wings, began to retrieve them, for all the world as if he had only just shot them.

The face of the coastguardsman leaning over the bow of the surging cutter turned suddenly blank, and his jaw fell, as the cutter fairly barged into the long shadow of the Squire's punt.

Mr. Fox, at the tiller, stood up, cursing aloud, and the water about them boiled and bubbled as the coastguards, straining on frantically backing oars, sought to check the wild course of the cutter—those oars, at least, which were not lifted straight on end to clear the punt grinding and scraping alongside.

Then the Squire's fair-bearded face peered over the gunwale of the cutter. It was purple, and for the moment speechless—this was a very angry Squire that glared upon them.

"What in thunder are you up to, Fox?" he roared at last.

Mr. Fox stifled his curses hurriedly. "But—but Dobson? Haven't you seen him, sir? He was running contraband—arms. At least, I believe it was Dobson, and I know he came up here," he cried.

"Seen him? No. Confound you and your Dobsons and your contraband-running!" the Squire bellowed. "You've ruined my brand-new punt

with your fly-by-night tricks. I shall make the Admiralty pay for it—what? Seen the man? No. Hang the man and you too, sir! Suppose he's slipped out on the mud."

And the Squire appeared to be in imminent danger of there and then having an apoplectic fit—so much so, in fact, that it took the unfortunate officer at least fifteen minutes to soothe the wrathful magnate, and to get him to understand the delicacy of the situation. By which time, of course, Dobson was safely in hiding.

When at last the Squire did appear to grasp things, he was, as Fox put it, too much the other way. He was all for hunting every suspected man down to his cottage and arresting him there and then, and the unfortunate Fox had to waste ten more valuable minutes explaining that, unless they could find Dobson on his punt with arms upon it, they had no evidence that the law would acknowledge at all. Finally, therefore, half-an-hour was wasted before they could manage to persuade the Squire to return to his mansion, and were left free to continue their man-hunt—and it was by then, of course, too late to hope for success.

Dobson remained in hiding for a week; but when it became quite evident that nothing was known of his little escapade, and that no one had any legal grounds for suspicion against him, he reappeared in the world again. What on earth could have happened to the punt and the cartridges was to him an utter enigma.

It was about a fortnight after that, and Dobson had already drawn his share of the profits from

contraband-running, which was sufficient to keep him in comfort for the rest of his days, when it became known in the village of Quigley Harbour that Squire Quigley had left his mansion and estate for four years, and would travel abroad.

Dobson, still excited as a schoolboy over his luck, found occasion to journey fifteen miles by train to Portsmouth on the day Squire Quigley was booked to take his departure "for forren parts." Dobson was going to invest in "one o' them new-fangled, 'igh-power, breech-loadin' wild-fowl guns," for he meant now to indulge in fowling, not for a living as heretofore, but by way of sport.

He happened to return in the London train, and as he alighted at Travant Junction—the nearest station to Quigley Harbour—he stepped from his carriage full into the bustle attending the departing Squire. That gentleman, it would seem, was about to journey to London in order to catch the night mail for the Continent. He was surrounded by all the proper accompaniment of valet with dressing-case, footmen with rugs, station-master bowing at the door of his first-class carriage, as may be expected to surround such a fine figure of a man as he looked in his gigantic fur-lined coat.

He did not appear to see the lean little figure of Dobson as he brushed past him. Nor had Dobson any desire to be seen; he wanted to get out of it quickly, and he had good reasons. Thus it happened that when the Squire turned with his hand on the window-strap and one foot on the footboard of his first-class compartment, and called him by name, Dobson acquired a sudden deafness, and did his

best to evaporate. One cannot, however, pretend to ignore the stentorian voice of a gentleman six feet two inches tall, and weighing sixteen stone, in a crowded public place for long, before a dozen people draw one's attention to the fact.

"Stiletto" Dobson came back reluctantly, and his heart seemed to get up in his throat and choke him. "All up," he said to himself. "'E's bin playin' wid me."

The Squire's smile, however, as he turned to Dobson after dismissing his retinue, was scarcely the smile of a foe. He pulled a visiting-card from his pocket and held it out to the marshman. "Do you know who that man is?" he said quietly.

Dobson gave an odd gasp, as if some one had stabbed him in the ribs, and was dumb. All the wrinkles about his weather-beaten face seemed suddenly to deepen and cry aloud to be noticed. His eyes widened, and in them was the look which one may see in the eyes of a trapped wild animal, and in the sudden stiffening of his limbs he also resembled a captured beast. He made no reply, but stared dumbly at the card, for on it was no name at all, but only, in bold black, the design of a treble-barbed arrow. It was the sign of his chief.

"I will tell you who that man is, my friend," the Squire continued, after a long pause. "It is the man who saved you when you sold me a basket of smuggled tobacco for a basket of eels; who turned the coastguards from the right scent that night you were captured in the oyster-shed; and who saved you in your last venture of all, when you left your punt full of rifle-cartridges with me and went

looking for wild-geese. There were no geese, my friend——”

At that moment the guard's whistle sounded, and Squire Quigley got into his carriage and shut the door.

“Do you know the name of that man?” he asked almost in a whisper, bending out, his mouth close to Dobson's ear.

“I suppose ye're goin' t' 'ave me arrested whatever I sez,” Dobson snapped, as a trapped beast would snap. “But I don't know 'oo the man is, an' if I did I shouldn't tell ye.”

The train was moving now. Dobson, without thinking about it, was running in order to keep up with the Squire's carriage, and he remembers noting with a sinking heart that a policeman stood beside the ticket-collector between him and liberty. Every instant he expected the Squire to give the word for his arrest; but instead he only leant out of the window, and shutting one eye, smiled. It was the countersign of the smugglers.

From “Off the Beaten Track.”

II

THE TENNIS BALLS

STANLEY J. WEYMAN

A FEW weeks before the death of the Duchess of Beaufort, on Easter Eve, 1599, made so great a change in the relations of all at Court that "Sourdis mourning" came to be a phrase for grief, genuine because interested, an affair that might have had a serious issue began, imperceptibly at the time, in the veriest trifle.

One day, while the King was still absent from Paris, I had a mind to play tennis, and for that purpose summoned La Trape, who had the charge of my balls, and sometimes, in the absence of better company, played with me. Of late, the balls he bought had given me small satisfaction, and I bade him bring me the bag, that I might choose the best. He did so, and I had not handled half-a-dozen before I found one, and later three others, so much more neatly sewn than the rest, and in all points so superior, that even an untrained eye could not fail to detect the difference.

"Look, man!" I said, holding out one of these for his inspection. "These are balls; the rest are rubbish. Cannot you see the difference? Where did you buy these? At Constant's?"

He muttered, "No, my lord," and looked confused.

This roused my curiosity. "Where, then?" I said sharply.

"Of a man who was at the gate yesterday."

"Oh!" I said. "Selling tennis balls?"

"Yes, my lord."

"Some rogue of a marker," I exclaimed, "from whom you bought filched goods! Who was it, man?"

"I don't know his name," La Trape answered. "He was a Spaniard."

"Well?"

"Who wanted to have an audience of your excellency."

"Ho!" I said drily. "Now I understand. Bring me your book. Or, tell me, what have you charged me for these balls?"

"Two francs," he muttered reluctantly.

"And never gave a sou, I'll swear!" I retorted. "You took the poor devil's balls, and left him at the gate! Ay, it is rogues like you get me a bad name!" I continued, affecting more anger than I felt—for, in truth, I was rather pleased with my quickness in discovering the cheat. "You steal and I bear the blame, and pay to boot! Off with you and find the fellow, and bring him to me, or it will be the worse for you!"

Glad to escape so easily, La Trape ran to the gate; but he failed to find his friend, and two or three days elapsed before I thought again of the matter, such petty rogueries being ingrained in a great man's *valetaille*, and being no more to be removed than the hairs from a man's arm. At the end of that time La Trape came to me, bringing the Spaniard; who had appeared again at the gate. The stranger proved to be a small, slight man, pale and yet brown, with

quick-glancing eyes. His dress was decent, but very poor, with more than one rent neatly darned. He made me a profound reverence, and stood waiting, with his cap in his hand, to be addressed ; but, with all his humility, I did not fail to detect an easiness of deportment and a propriety that did not seem absolutely strange since he was a Spaniard, but which struck me, nevertheless, as requiring some explanation. I asked him, civilly, who he was. He answered that his name was Diego.

"You speak French?"

"I am of Guipuzcoa, my lord," he answered, "where we sometimes speak three tongues."

"That is true," I said. "And it is your trade to make tennis balls?"

"No, my lord ; to use them," he answered with a certain dignity.

"You are a player, then?"

"If it please your excellency."

"Where have you played?"

"At Madrid, where I was the keeper of the Duke of Segovia's court ; and at Toledo, where I frequently had the honour of playing against M. de Montserrat."

"You are a good player?"

"If your excellency," he answered impulsively, "will give me an opportunity——"

"Softly, softly," I said, somewhat taken aback by his earnestness. "Granted that you are a player you seem to have played to small purpose. Why are you here, my friend, and not in Madrid?"

He drew up his sleeves, and showed me that his wrists were deeply scarred.

I shrugged my shoulders. "You have been in the hands of the Holy Brotherhood?" I said.

"No, my lord," he answered bitterly. "Of the Holy Inquisition."

"You are a Protestant?"

He bowed.

On that I fell to considering him with more attention, but at the same time with some distrust; reflecting that he was a Spaniard, and recalling the numberless plots against his Majesty of which that nation had been guilty. Still, if his tale were true he deserved support; with a view therefore to testing this I questioned him further, and learned that he had for a long time disguised his opinions, until, opening them in an easy moment to a fellow servant, he found himself upon the first occasion of quarrel betrayed to the Fathers. After suffering much, and giving himself up for lost in their dungeons, he made his escape in a manner sufficiently remarkable, if I might believe his story. In the prison with him lay a Moor, for whose exchange against a Christian taken by the Saltee pirates an order came down. It arrived in the evening; the Moor was to be removed in the morning. An hour after the arrival of the news, however, and when the two had just been locked up for the night, the Moor, overcome with excess of joy, suddenly expired. At first the Spaniard was for giving the alarm; but, being an ingenious fellow, in a few minutes he summoned all his wits together and made a plan. Contriving to blacken his face and hands with charcoal he changed clothes with the corpse, and muffling himself up after the fashion of the Moors in a cold climate he succeeded in the early morning

in passing out in his place. Those who had charge of him had no reason to expect an escape, and once on the road he had little difficulty in getting away, and eventually reached France after a succession of narrow chances.

All this the man told me so simply that I knew not which to admire more, the daring of his device—since for a white man to pass for a brown is beyond the common scope of such disguises—or his present modesty in relating it. However, neither of these things seemed to my mind a good reason for disbelief. As to the one, I considered that an impostor would have put forward something more simple; and as to the other, I have all my life long observed that those who have had strange experiences tell them in a very ordinary way. Besides, I had fresh in my mind the diverting escape of the Duke of Nemours from Lyons, which I have elsewhere related. On the other hand, and despite all these things, the story might be false; so with a view to testing one part of it, at least, I bade him come and play with me that afternoon.

“My lord,” he said bluntly, “I had rather not. For if I defeat your excellency, I may defeat also your good intentions. And if I permit you to win, I shall seem to be an impostor.”

Somewhat surprised by his forethought, I reassured him on this point; and his game, which proved to be one of remarkable strength and *finesse*, and fairly on an equality, as it seemed to me, with that of the best French players, persuaded me that at any rate the first part of his tale was true. Accordingly I made him a present, and, in addition, bade Maignan

pay him a small allowance for a while. For this he showed his gratitude by attaching himself to my household ; and as it was the fashion at that time to keep tennis-masters of this class, I found it occasionally amusing to pit him against other well-known players. In the course of a few weeks he gained me great credit ; and though I am not so foolish as to attach importance to such trifles, but, on the contrary, think an old soldier who stood fast at Coutras, or even a clerk who has served the King honestly—if such a prodigy there be—more deserving than these professors, still I do not err on the other side ; but count him a fool who, because he has solid cause to value himself, disdains the *éclat* which the attachment of such persons gives him in the public eye.

The man went by the name of Diego the Spaniard, and his story, which gradually became known, together with the excellence of his play, made him so much the fashion that more than one tried to detach him from my service. The King heard of him, and would have played with him, but the sudden death of Madame de Beaufort, which occurred soon afterwards, threw the Court into mourning ; and for a while, in pursuing the negotiations for the King's divorce, and in conducting a correspondence of the most delicate character with the Queen, I lost sight of my player—inso much, that I scarcely knew whether he still formed part of my suite or not.

My attention was presently recalled to him, however, in a rather remarkable manner. One morning Don Antonio d'Evora, Secretary to the Spanish Embassy, and a brother of that d'Evora who com-

manded the Spanish Foot at Paris in '94, called on me at the Arsenal, to which I had just removed, and desired to see me. I bade them admit him; but as my secretaries were at the time at work with me, I left them and received him in the garden—supposing that he wished to speak to me about the affair of Saluces, and preferring, like the King my master, to talk of matters of State in the open air.

However, I was mistaken. Don Antonio said nothing about Savoy, but after the usual preliminaries, which a Spaniard never omits, plunged into a long harangue upon the comity which, now that peace reigned, should exist between the two nations. For some time I waited patiently to learn what he would be at; but he seemed to be lost in his own eloquence, and at last I took him up.

"All this is very well, M. d'Evora," I said. "I quite agree with you that the times are changed, that amity is not the same thing as war, and that a grain of sand in the eye is unpleasant," for he had said all of these things. "But I fail, being a plain man and no diplomatist, to see what you want me to do."

"It is the smallest matter," he said, waving his hand gracefully.

"And yet," I retorted, "you seem to find a difficulty in coming at it."

"As you do at the grain of sand in the eye," he answered wittily. "After all, however, in what you say, M. de Rosny, there is some truth. I feel that I am on delicate ground; but I am sure that you will pardon me. You have in your suite a certain Diego."

"It may be so," I said, masking my surprise, and affecting indifference.

"A tennis-player."

I shrugged my shoulders. "The man is known," I said.

"A Protestant?"

"It is not impossible."

"And a subject of the King, my master. A man," Don Antonio continued, with increasing stiffness, "in fine, M. de Rosny, who, after committing various offences, murdered his comrade in prison, and escaping in his clothes, took refuge in this country."

I shrugged my shoulders again.

"I have no knowledge of that," I said coldly.

"No, or I am sure that you would not harbour the fellow," the secretary answered. "Now that you do know it, however, I take it for granted that you will dismiss him? If you held any but the great place you do hold, M. de Rosny, it would be different; but all the world see who follow you, and this man's presence stains you, and is an offence to my master."

"Softly, softly, M. d'Evora," I said, with a little warmth. "You go too fast. Let me tell you first, that, for my honour, I take care of it myself; and, secondly, for your master, I do not allow even my own to meddle with my household."

"But, my lord," he said pompously, "the King of Spain——"

"Is the King of Spain," I answered, cutting him short without much ceremony. "But in the Arsenal of Paris, which, for the present, is my house, I am king. And I brook no usurpers, M. d'Evora."

He assented to that with a constrained smile.

"Then I can say no more," he answered. "I have warned you that the man is a rogue. If you will still entertain him, I wash my hands of it. But I fear the consequences, M. de Rosny, and, frankly, it lessens my opinion of your sagacity."

Thereat I bowed in my turn, and after the exchange of some civilities he took his leave. Considering his application after he was gone, I confess that I found nothing surprising in it; and had it come from a man whom I held in greater respect I might have complied with it in an indirect fashion. But though it might have led me under some circumstances to discard Diego, naturally, since it confirmed his story in some points, and proved besides that he was not a *persona grata* at the Spanish Embassy, it did not lead me to value him less. And as within the week he was so fortunate as to defeat La Varenne's champion in a great match at the Louvre, and won also a match at M. de Montpensier's which put fifty crowns into my pocket, I thought less and less of d'Evora's remonstrance; until the king's return put it quite out of my head. The entanglement with Mademoiselle d'Entragues, which was destined to be the most fatal of all Henry's attachments, was then in the forming; and the king plunged into every kind of amusement with fresh zest. The very day after his return he matched his marker, a rogue, but an excellent player, against my man; and laid me twenty crowns on the event, the match to be played on the following Saturday after a dinner which M. de Lude was giving in honour of the lady.

On the Thursday, however, who should come in to me, while I was sitting alone after supper, but Maignan : who, closing the door and dismissing the page who waited there, told me with a very long face and an air of vast importance that he had discovered something.

"Something?" I said, being inclined at the moment to be merry. "What? A plot to reduce your perquisites, you rascal?"

"No, my lord," he answered stoutly. "But to tap your excellency's secrets."

"Indeed," I said pleasantly, not believing a word of it. "And who is to hang?"

"The Spaniard," he answered in a low voice.

That sobered me, by putting the matter in a new light ; and I sat a moment looking at him and reviewing Diego's story, which assumed on the instant an aspect so uncommon and almost incredible that I wondered how I had ever allowed it to pass. But when I proceeded from this to the substance of Maignan's charge I found an *impasse* in this direction also, and I smiled. "So it is Diego, is it?" I said. "You think that he is a spy?"

Maignan nodded.

"Then tell me," I asked, "what opportunity has he of learning more than all the world knows? He has not been in my apartments since I engaged him. He has seen none of my papers. The youngest footboy could tell all he has learned."

"True, my lord," Maignan answered slowly ; "but——"

"Well?"

"I saw him this evening, talking with a priest

in the Rue Petits Pois ; and he calls himself a Protestant."

" Ah ! You are sure that the man was a priest ? "

" I know him. "

" For whom ? "

" One of the chaplains at the Spanish Embassy. "

It was natural that after this I should take a more serious view of the matter ; and I did so. But my former difficulty still remained, for, assuming this to be a cunning plot, and d'Evora's application to me a *ruse* to throw me off my guard, I could not see where their advantage lay ; since the Spaniard's occupation was not of a nature to give him the entry to my confidence or the chance of ransacking my papers. I questioned Maignan further, therefore, but without result. He had seen the two together in a secret kind of way, viewing them himself from the window of a house where he had an assignation. He had not been near enough to hear what they said, but he was sure that no quarrel took place between them, and equally certain that it was no chance meeting that brought them together.

Infected by his assurance, I could still see no issue ; and no object in such an intrigue. And in the end I contented myself with bidding him watch the Spaniard closely, and report to me the following evening ; adding that he might confide the matter to La Trape, who was a supple fellow, and of the two the easier companion.

Accordingly, next evening Maignan again appeared, this time with a face even longer ; so that at first I supposed him to have discovered a plot worse than Chastel's ; but it turned out that he had discovered

nothing. The Spaniard had spent the morning in lounging and the afternoon in practice at the Louvre, and from first to last had conducted himself in the most innocent manner possible. On this I rallied Maignan on his mare's nest, and was inclined to dismiss the matter as such; still, before doing so, I thought I would see La Trape, and dismissing Maignan I sent for him.

When he was come, "Well," I said, "have you anything to say?"

"One little thing only, your excellency," he answered slyly, "and of no importance."

"But you did not tell it to Maignan?"

"No, my lord," he replied, his face relaxing in a cunning smile.

"Well?"

"Once to-day I saw Diego where he should not have been."

"Where?"

"In the King's dressing-room at the tennis-court."

"You saw him there?"

"I saw him coming out," he answered.

It may be imagined how I felt on hearing this; for although I might have thought nothing of the matter before my suspicions were aroused—since any man might visit such a place out of curiosity—now, my mind being disturbed, I was quick to conceive the worst, and saw with horror my beloved master already destroyed through my carelessness. I questioned La Trape in a fury, but could learn nothing more. He had seen the man slip out, and that was all.

"But did you not go in yourself?" I said, restraining my impatience with difficulty.

"Afterwards? Yes, my lord."

"And made no discovery?"

He shook his head.

"Was anything prepared for his Majesty?"

"There was sherbet; and some water."

"You tried them?"

La Trape grinned. "No, my lord," he said. "But I gave some to Maignan."

"Not explaining?"

"No, my lord."

"You sacrilegious rascal!" I cried, amused in spite of my anxiety. "And he was none the worse?"

"No, my lord."

Not satisfied yet, I continued to press him, but with so little success that I still found myself unable to decide whether the Spaniard had wandered in innocently or to explore his ground. In the end, therefore, I made up my mind to see things for myself; and early next morning, at an hour when I was not likely to be observed, I went out by a back door, and with my face muffled and no other attendance than Maignan and La Trape, went to the tennis-court and examined the dressing-room.

This was a small closet on the first floor, of a size to hold two or three persons, and with a casement through which the King, if he wished to be private, might watch the game. Its sole furniture consisted of a little table with a mirror, a seat for his Majesty, and a couple of stools, so that it offered small scope for investigation. True, the stale sherbet and the water were still there, the carafes standing on the

table beside an empty comfit box, and a few toilet necessities ; and it will be believed that I lost no time in examining them. But I made no discovery, and when I had passed my eye over everything else that the room contained, and noticed nothing that seemed in the slightest degree suspicious, I found myself completely at a loss. I went to the window, and for a moment looked idly into the court.

But neither did any light come thence, and I had turned again and was about to leave, when my eye alighted on a certain thing and I stopped.

"What is that ?" I said. It was a thin case, book-shaped, of Genoa velvet, somewhat worn.

"Plaister," Maignan, who was waiting at the door, answered. "His Majesty's hand is not well yet, and as your excellency knows, he——"

"Silence, fool !" I cried. And I stood rooted to the spot, overwhelmed by the conviction that I held the clue to the mystery, and so shaken by the horror which that conviction naturally brought with it that I could not move a finger. A design so fiendish and monstrous as that which I suspected might rouse the dullest sensibilities, in a case where it threatened the meanest ; but being aimed in this at the King, my master, from whom I had received so many benefits, and on whose life the well-being of all depended, it goaded me to the warmest resentment. I looked round the tennis-court—which, empty, shadowy and silent, seemed a fit place for such horrors—with rage and repulsion ; apprehending in a moment of sad presage all the accursed strokes of an enemy whom nothing could propitiate, and who, sooner or later,

must set all my care at nought, and take from France her greatest benefactor.

But, it will be said, I had no proof, only a conjecture; and this is true, but of it hereafter. Suffice it that, as soon as I had swallowed my indignation, I took all the precautions affection could suggest or duty enjoin, omitting nothing; and then, confiding the matter to no one—the two men who were with me excepted—I prepared to observe the issue with gloomy satisfaction.

The match was to take place at three in the afternoon. A little after that hour, I arrived at the tennis-court, attended by La Font and other gentlemen, and M. L'Huillier, the councillor, who had dined with me. L'Huillier's business had detained me somewhat, and the men had begun; but as I had anticipated this, I had begged my good friend De Vic to have an eye to my interests. The King, who was in the gallery, had with him M. de Montpensier, the Comte de Lude, Vitry, Varennes, and the Florentine Ambassador, with Sancy and some others. Mademoiselle d'Enragues and two ladies had taken possession of his closet and from the casement were pouring forth a perpetual fire of *badinage* and *bons mots*. The tennis-court, in a word, presented as different an aspect as possible from that which it had worn in the morning. The sharp crack of the ball, as it bounded from side to side, was almost lost in the crisp laughter and babel of voices; which as I entered rose into a perfect uproar, Mademoiselle having just flung a whole lapful of roses across the court in return for some witticism. These falling short of the gallery had lighted on the head of the astonished Diego, causing

a temporary cessation of play, during which I took my seat.

Madame de Lude's saucy eye picked me out in a moment. "Oh, the grave man!" she cried. "Crown him, too, with roses."

"As they crowned the skull at the feast, madame?" I answered, saluting her gallantly.

"No, but as the man whom the King delighteth to honour," she answered, making a face at me. "Ha! ha! I am not afraid! I am not afraid! I am not afraid!"

There was a good deal of laughter at this. "What shall I do to her, M. de Rosny?" Mademoiselle cried out, coming to my rescue.

"If you will have the goodness to kiss her, mademoiselle," I answered, "I will consider it an advance, and as one of the council of the King's finances, my credit should be good for the re——"

"Thank you!" the King cried, nimbly cutting me short. "But as my finances seem to be the security, faith, I will see to the repayment myself! Let them start again; but I am afraid that my twenty crowns are yours, Grand Master; your man is in fine play."

I looked into the court. Diego, lithe and sinewy, with his cropped black hair, high colour, and quick shallow eyes, bounded here and there, swift and active as a panther. Seeing him thus, with his heart in his returns, I could not but doubt; more, as the game proceeded, amid the laughter and jests and witty sallies of the courtiers, I felt the doubt grow; the riddle became each minute more abstruse, the man more mysterious. But that was of no moment now.

A little after four o'clock the match ended in my favour ; on which the King, tired of inaction, sprang up, and declaring that he would try Diego's strength himself, entered the court. I followed, with Vitry and others, and several strokes which had been made were tested and discussed. Presently, the King going to talk with Mademoiselle at her window, I remarked the Spaniard and Maignan, with the King's marker, and one or two others waiting at the farther door. Almost at the same moment I observed a sudden movement among them, and voices raised higher than was decent, and I called out sharply to know what it was.

"An accident, my lord," one of the men answered respectfully.

"It is nothing," another muttered. "Maignan was playing tricks, your excellency, and cut Diego's hand a little ; that is all."

"Cut his hand now !" I exclaimed angrily. "And the King about to play with him. Let me see it !"

Diego sulkily held up his hand, and I saw a cut, ugly but of no importance.

"Pooh !" I said ; "it is nothing. Get some plaister. Here, you," I continued wrathfully, turning to Maignan, "since you have done the mischief, booby, you must repair it. Get some plaister, do you hear ? He cannot play in that state."

Diego muttered something, and Maignan that he had not got any ; but before I could answer that he must get some, La Trape thrust his way to the front, and producing a small piece from his pocket, proceeded with a droll air of extreme carefulness to treat the hand. The other knaves fell into the joke,

and the Spaniard had no option but to submit; though his scowling face showed that he bore Maignan no good-will, and that but for my presence he might not have been so complaisant. La Trape was bringing his surgery to an end by demanding a fee, in the most comical manner possible, when the King returned to our part of the court. "What is it?" he said. "Is anything the matter?"

"No, sire," I said. "My man has cut his hand a little, but it is nothing."

"Can he play?" Henry asked with his accustomed good-nature.

"Oh, yes, sire," I answered. "I have bound it up with a strip of plaister from the case in your Majesty's closet."

"He has not lost blood?"

"No, sire."

And he had not. But it was small wonder that the King asked; small wonder, for the man's face had changed in the last ten seconds to a strange leaden colour; a terror like that of a wild beast that sees itself trapped had leapt into his eyes. He shot a furtive glance round him, and I saw him slide his hand behind him. But I was prepared for that, and as the King moved off a pace I slipped to the man's side, as if to give him some directions about his game.

"Listen," I said, in a voice heard only by him; "take the dressing off your hand, and I have you broken on the wheel. You understand? Now play."

Assuring myself that he did understand, and that Maignan and La Trape were at hand if he should attempt anything, I went back to my place, and sitting

down by De Vic began to watch that strange game; while Mademoiselle's laughter and Madame de Lude's gibes floated across the court, and mingled with the eager applause and more dexterous criticisms of the courtiers. The light was beginning to sink, and for this reason, perhaps, no one perceived the Spaniard's pallor; but De Vic, after a rally or two, remarked that he was not playing his full strength.

"Wise man!" he added.

"Yes," I said. "Who plays well against kings plays ill."

De Vic laughed. "How he sweats!" he said, "and he never turned a hair when he played Colet. I suppose he is nervous."

"Probably," I said.

And so they chattered and laughed—chattered and laughed, seeing an ordinary game between the King and a marker; while I, for whom the court had grown sombre as a dungeon, saw a villain struggling in his own toils, livid with the fear of death, and tortured by horrible apprehensions. Use and habit were still so powerful with the man that he played on mechanically with his hands, but his eyes every now and then sought mine with the look of the trapped beast; and on these occasions I could see his lips move in prayer or cursing. The sweat poured down his face as he moved to and fro, and I fancied that his features were beginning to twitch. Presently—I have said that the light was failing, so that it was not in my imagination only that the court was sombre—the King held his ball. "My friend, your man is not well," he said, turning to me.

"It is nothing, sire; the honour you do him

makes him nervous," I answered. "Play up, sirrah," I continued; "you make too good a courtier."

Mademoiselle d'Entragues clapped her hands and laughed at the hit; and I saw Diego glare at her with an indescribable look, in which hatred and despair and a horror of reproach were so nicely mingled with something as exceptional as his position, that the whole baffled words. Doubtless the gibes and laughter he heard, the trifling that went on round him, the very game in which he was engaged, and from which he dared not draw back, seemed in his eyes the most appalling mockery; but ignorant who were in the secret, unable to guess how his diabolical plot had been discovered, uncertain even whether the whole were not a concerted piece, he went on playing his part mechanically; with starting eyes and labouring chest, and lips that, twitching and working, lost colour each minute. At length he missed a stroke, and staggering leaned against the wall, his face livid and ghastly. The King took the alarm at that, and cried out that something was wrong. Those who were sitting rose. I nodded to Maignan to go to the man.

"It is a fit," I said. "He is subject to them, and doubtless the excitement—but I am sorry that it has spoiled your Majesty's game."

"It has not," Henry answered kindly. "The light is gone. But have him looked to, will you, my friend? If La Rivière were here he might do something for him."

While he spoke the servants had gathered round the man, but with the timidity which characterises that class in such emergencies, they would not touch

him. As I crossed the court, and they made way for me, the Spaniard, who was still standing, though in a strange and distorted fashion, turned his blood-shot eyes on me.

"A priest!" he muttered, framing the words with difficulty, "a priest!"

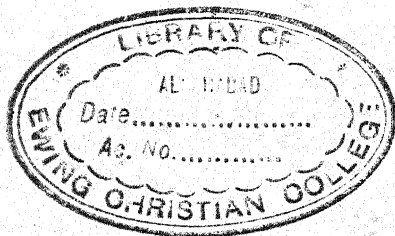
I directed Maignan to fetch one. "And do you," I continued to the other servants, "take him into a room somewhere."

They obeyed reluctantly. As they carried him out, the King, content with my statement, was giving his hand to Mademoiselle to descend the stairs; and neither he nor any, save the two men in my confidence, had the slightest suspicion that aught was the matter beyond a natural illness. But I shuddered when I considered how narrow had been the King's escape, how trifling the circumstances which had led to suspicion, how fortuitous the inspiration by which I chanced on discovery. The delay of a single day, the occurrence of the slightest mishap, might have been fatal not to him only but to the best interests of France; which his death at a time when he was still childless must have plunged into the most melancholy of wars.

Of the wretched Spaniard I need say little more. Caught in his own snare, he was no sooner withdrawn from the court than he fell into violent convulsions, which held him until midnight; when he died with symptoms and under circumstances so nearly resembling those which had attended the death of Madame de Beaufort at Easter, that I have several times dwelt on the strange coincidence, and striven to find the connecting link. But I never hit on it; and the

King's death, and that unexplained tendency to imitate great crimes under which the vulgar labour, prevailed with me to keep the matter secret. Nay, as I believed that d'Evora had played the part of an unconscious tool, and as a hint pressed home sufficed to procure the withdrawal of the chaplain whom Maignan had named, I did not think it necessary to disclose the matter even to the King my master.

From "Memoirs of a Minister of France."



III

THE GIFT OF THE MAGI

'O. HENRY'

ONE dollar and eighty-seven cents. That was all. And sixty cents of it was in pennies. Pennies saved one and two at a time by bulldozing the grocer and the vegetable man and the butcher until one's cheek burned with the silent imputation of parsimony that such close dealing implied. Three times Della counted it. One dollar and eighty-seven cents. And the next day would be Christmas.

There was clearly nothing left to do but flop down on the shabby little couch and howl. So Della did it. Which instigates the moral reflection that life is made up of sobs, sniffles, and smiles, with sniffles predominating.

While the mistress of the home is gradually subsiding from the first stage to the second, take a look at the home. A furnished flat at \$8 per week. It did not exactly beggar description, but it certainly had that word on the look-out for the mendicancy squad.

In the vestibule below was a letter-box into which no letter would go, and an electric button from which no mortal finger could coax a ring. Also appertaining thereunto was a card bearing the name "Mr. James Dillingham Young."

The "Dillingham" had been flung to the breeze during a former period of prosperity when its possessor was being paid \$30 per week. Now, when the income was shrunk to \$20, the letters of "Dillingham" looked blurred, as though they were thinking seriously of contracting to a modest and unassuming D. But whenever Mr. James Dillingham Young came home and reached his flat above he was called "Jim" and greatly hugged by Mrs. James Dillingham Young, already introduced to you as Della. Which is all very good.

Della finished her cry and attended to her cheeks with the powder rag. She stood by the window and looked out dully at a grey cat walking a grey fence in a grey backyard. To-morrow would be Christmas Day, and she had only \$1.87 with which to buy Jim a present. She had been saving every penny she could for months, with this result. Twenty dollars a week—doesn't go far. Expenses had been greater than she had calculated. They always are. Only \$1.87 to buy a present for Jim. Her Jim. Many a happy hour she had spent planning for something nice for him. Something fine and rare and sterling—something just a little bit near to being worthy of the honour of being owned by Jim.

There was a pier-glass between the windows of the room. Perhaps you have seen a pier-glass in an \$8 flat. A very thin and very agile person may, by observing his reflection in a rapid sequence of longitudinal strips, obtain a fairly accurate conception of his looks. Della, being slender, had mastered the art.

Suddenly she whirled from the window and stood before the glass. Her eyes were shining brilliantly,

but her face had lost its colour within twenty seconds. Rapidly she pulled down her hair and let it fall to its full length.

Now, there were two possessions of the James Dillinghams Young in which they both took a mighty pride. One was Jim's gold watch that had been his father's and his grandfather's. The other was Della's hair. Had the Queen of Sheba lived in the flat across the airshaft, Della would have let her hair hang out the window some day to dry just to depreciate Her Majesty's jewels and gifts. Had King Solomon been the janitor, with all his treasures piled up in the basement, Jim would have pulled out his watch every time he passed, just to see him pluck at his beard from envy.

So now Della's beautiful hair fell about her, rippling and shining like a cascade of brown waters. It reached below her knee and made itself almost a garment for her. And then she did it up again nervously and quickly. Once she faltered for a minute and stood still while a tear or two splashed on the worn red carpet.

On went her old brown jacket; on went her old brown hat. With a whirl of skirts and with the brilliant sparkle still in her eyes she fluttered out of the door and down the stairs to the street.

Where she stopped the sign read: "Mme. Sofronie. Hair Goods of All Kinds." One flight up Della ran, and collected herself, panting. Madame, large, too white, chilly, hardly looked the "Sofronie."

"Will you buy my hair?" asked Della.

"I buy hair," said Madame. "Take yer hat off and let's have a sight at the looks of it."

Down rippled the brown cascade.

"Twenty dollars," said Madame, lifting the mass with a practised hand.

"Give it to me quick," said Della.

Oh, and the next two hours tripped by on rosy wings. Forget the hashed metaphor. She was ransacking the stores for Jim's present.

She found it at last. It surely had been made for Jim and no one else. There was no other like it in any of the stores, and she had turned all of them inside out. It was a platinum fob chain simple and chaste in design, properly proclaiming its value by substance alone and not by meretricious ornamentation—as all good things should do. It was even worthy of The Watch. As soon as she saw it she knew that it must be Jim's. It was like him. Quietness and value—the description applied to both. Twenty-one dollars they took from her for it, and she hurried home with the 87 cents. With that chain on his watch Jim might be properly anxious about the time in any company. Grand as the watch was, he sometimes looked at it on the sly on account of the old leather strap that he used in place of a chain. —

When Della reached home her intoxication gave way a little to prudence and reason. She got out her curling irons and lighted the gas and went to work repairing the ravages made by generosity added to love. Which is always a tremendous task, dear friends—a mammoth task.

Within forty minutes her head was covered with tiny, close-lying curls that made her look wonderfully like a truant schoolboy. She looked at her reflection in the mirror long, carefully, and critically.

"If Jim doesn't kill me," she said to herself, "before he takes a second look at me, he'll say I look like a Coney island chorus girl. But what could I do—oh! what could I do with a dollar and eighty-seven cents?"

At seven o'clock the coffee was made and the frying-pan was on the back of the stove, hot and ready to cook the chops.

Jim was never late. Della doubled the fob chain in her hand and sat on the corner of the table near the door that he always entered. Then she heard his step on the stair away down on the first flight, and she turned white for just a moment. She had a habit of saying little silent prayers about the simplest everyday things, and now she whispered: "Please God, make him think I am still pretty."

The door opened and Jim stepped in and closed it. He looked thin and very serious. Poor fellow, he was only twenty-two—and to be burdened with a family! He needed a new overcoat and he was without gloves.

Jim stepped inside the door, as immovable as a setter at the scent of quail. His eyes were fixed upon Della, and there was an expression in them that she could not read, and it terrified her. It was not anger, nor surprise, nor disapproval, nor horror, nor any of the sentiments that she had been prepared for. He simply stared at her fixedly with that peculiar expression on his face.

Della wriggled off the table and went for him.

"Jim, darling," she cried, "don't look at me that way. I had my hair cut off and sold it because I couldn't have lived through Christmas without

giving you a present. It'll grow out again—you won't mind, will you? I just had to do it. My hair grows awfully fast. Say 'Merry Christmas!' Jim, and let's be happy. You don't know what a nice—what a beautiful, nice gift I've got for you."

"You've cut off your hair?" asked Jim, laboriously, as if he had not arrived at that patent fact yet even after the hardest mental labour.

"Cut it off and sold it," said Della. "Don't you like me just as well, anyhow? I'm me without my hair, ain't I?"

Jim looked about the room curiously.

"You say your hair is gone?" he said with an air almost of idiocy.

"You needn't look for it," said Della. "It's sold, I tell you—sold and gone, too. It's Christmas Eve, boy. Be good to me, for it went for you. Maybe the hairs of my head were numbered," she went on with a sudden serious sweetness, "but nobody could ever count my love for you. Shall I put the chops on, Jim?"

Out of his trance Jim seemed quickly to wake. He enfolded his Della. For ten seconds let us regard with discreet scrutiny some inconsequential object in the other direction. Eight dollars a week or a million a year—what is the difference? A mathematician or a wit would give you the wrong answer. The magi brought valuable gifts, but that was not among them. This dark assertion will be illuminated later on.

Jim drew a package from his overcoat pocket and threw it upon the table.

"Don't make any mistake, Dell," he said, "about

me. I don't think there's anything in the way of a haircut or a shave or a shampoo that could make me like my girl any less. But, if you'll unwrap that package you may see why you had me going awhile at first."

White fingers and nimble tore at the string and paper. And then an ecstatic scream of joy; and then, alas! a quick feminine change to hysterical tears and wails, necessitating the immediate employment of all the comforting powers of the lord of the flat.

For there lay The Combs—the set of combs, side and back, that Della had worshipped for long in a Broadway window. Beautiful combs, pure tortoiseshell, with jewelled rims—just the shade to wear in the beautiful vanished hair. They were expensive combs, she knew, and her heart had simply craved and yearned over them without the least hope of possession. And now they were hers, but the tresses that should have adorned the coveted adornments were gone.

But she hugged them to her bosom, and at length she was able to look up with dim eyes and a smile and say: "My hair grows so fast, Jim!"

And then Della leaped up like a little singed cat and cried, "Oh, oh!"

Jim had not yet seen his beautiful present. She held it out to him eagerly upon her open palm. The dull precious metal seemed to flash with a reflection of her bright and ardent spirit.

"Isn't it a dandy, Jim? I hunted all over town to find it. You'll have to look at the time a hundred times a day now. Give me your watch. I want to see how it looks on it."

Instead of obeying, Jim tumbled down on the couch and put his hands under the back of his head and smiled.

"Dell," said he, "let's put our Christmas presents away and keep 'em awhile. They're too nice to use just at present. I sold the watch to get the money to buy your combs. And now suppose you put the chops on."

The magi, as you know, were wise men—wonderfully wise men—who brought gifts to the Babe in the manger. They invented the art of giving Christmas presents. Being wise, their gifts were no doubt wise ones, possibly bearing the privilege of exchange in case of duplication. And here I have lamely related to you the uneventful chronicle of two foolish children in a flat who most unwisely sacrificed for each other the greatest treasures of their house. But in a last word to the wise of these days, let it be said that of all who give gifts these two were the wisest. Of all who give and receive gifts, such as they are wisest. Everywhere they are wisest. They are the magi.

From "The Four Million."



IV
THE ADVENTURE OF THE SPECTACLED
ROADMAN

JOHN BUCHAN

I SAT down on the very crest of the pass and took stock of my position.

Behind me was the road climbing through a long cleft in the hills, which was the upper glen of some notable river. In front was a flat space of maybe a mile, all pitted with bog-holes and rough with tussocks, and then beyond it the road fell steeply down another glen to a plain whose blue dimness melted into the distance. To left and right were round-shouldered green hills as smooth as pancakes, but to the south—that is, the left hand—there was a glimpse of high heathery mountains, which I remembered from the map as the big knot of hill which I had chosen for my sanctuary. I was on the central boss of a huge upland country, and could see everything moving for miles. In the meadows below the road half a mile back a cottage smoked, but it was the only sign of human life. Otherwise there was only the calling of plovers and the tinkling of little streams.

It was now about seven o'clock, and as I waited I heard once again that ominous beat in the air. Then I realised that my vantage-ground might be in reality a trap. There was no cover for a tomtit in those bald green places.

I sat quite still and hopeless while the beat grew louder. Then I saw an aeroplane coming up from the east. It was flying high, but as I looked it dropped several hundred feet and began to circle round the knot of hill in narrowing circles, just as a hawk wheels before it pounces. Now it was flying very low, and now the observer on board caught sight of me. I could see one of the two occupants examining me through glasses.

Suddenly it began to rise in swift whorls, and the next I knew it was speeding eastward again till it became a speck in the blue morning.

That made me do some savage thinking. My enemies had located me, and the next thing would be a cordon round me. I didn't know what force they could command, but I was certain it would be sufficient. The aeroplane had seen my bicycle, and would conclude that I would try to escape by the road. In that case there might be a chance on the moors to the right or left. I wheeled the machine a hundred yards from the highway, and plunged it into a moss-hole where it sank among pondweed and water-buttercups. Then I climbed to a knoll which gave me a view of the two valleys. Nothing was stirring on the long white ribbon that threaded them.

I have said there was not cover in the whole place to hide a rat. As the day advanced it was flooded with soft fresh light till it had the fragrant sunniness of the South African veld. At other times I would have liked the place, but now it seemed to suffocate me. The free moorlands were prison walls, and the keen hill air was the breath of a dungeon.

I tossed a coin—heads right, tails left—and it

fell heads, so I turned to the north. In a little I came to the brow of the ridge which was the containing wall of the pass. I saw the highroad for maybe ten miles, and far down it something that was moving, and that I took to be a motor-car. Beyond the ridge I looked on a rolling green moor, which fell away into wooded glens. Now my life on the veld has given me the eyes of a kite, and I can see things for which most men need a telescope. . . . Away down the slope, a couple of miles away, several men were advancing like a row of beaters at a shoot. . . .

I dropped out of sight behind the sky-line. That way was shut to me, and I must try the bigger hills to the south beyond the highway. The car I had noticed was getting nearer, but it was still a long way off with some very steep gradients before it. I ran hard, crouching low except in the hollows, and as I ran I kept scanning the brow of the hill before me. Was it imagination, or did I see figures, one, two, perhaps more—moving in a glen beyond the stream?

If you are hemmed in on all sides in a patch of land there is only one chance of escape. You must stay in the patch, and let your enemies search it, and not find you. That was good sense, but how on earth was I to escape notice in that table-cloth of a place? I would have buried myself to the neck in mud or lain below water or climbed the tallest tree. But there was not a stick of wood, the bog-holes were little puddles, the stream was a slender trickle. There was nothing but short heather, and bare hill bent, and the white highway.

Then in a tiny bight of road, beside a heap of stones, I found the Roadman.

He had just arrived, and was wearily flinging down his hammer. He looked at me with a fishy eye and yawned.

"Confoond the day I ever left the herdin'!" he said, as if to the world at large. "There I was my ain maister. Now I'm a slave to the Government, tethered to the roadside, wi' sair een, and a back like a suckle."

He took up the hammer, struck a stone, dropped the implement with an oath, and put both hands to his ears. "Mercy on me! My heid's burstin'!" he cried.

He was a wild figure, about my own size but much bent, with a week's beard on his chin, and a pair of big horn spectacles.

"I canna dae't," he cried again. "The Surveyor maun just report me. I'm for my bed."

I asked him what was the trouble, though indeed that was clear enough.

"The trouble is that I'm no sober. Last nicht my dochter Merran was waddit, and they danced till fower in the byre. Me and some ither chiels sat down to the drinkin', and here I am. Peety that I ever lookit on the wine when it was red!"

I agreed with him about bed.

"It's easy speakin'," he moaned. "But I got a post-caird yestreen sayin' that the new Road Surveyor would be round the day. He'll come and he'll no find me, or else he'll find me fou, and either way I'm a done man. I'll awa' back to my bed and say I'm no weel, but I doot that'll no help me, for they ken my kind o' no-weel-ness."

Then I had an inspiration. "Does the new Surveyor know you?" I asked.

"No him. He's just been a week at the job. He rins about in a wee motor-cawr, and wad speir the inside oot o' a whelk."

"Where's your house?" I asked, and was directed by a wavering finger to the cottage by the stream.

"Well, back to your bed," I said, "and sleep in peace. I'll take on your job for a bit and see the Surveyor."

He stared at me blankly; then, as the notion dawned on his fuddled brain, his face broke into the vacant drunkard's smile.

"You're the billy," he cried. "It'll be easy eneuch managed. I've finished that bing o' stanes, so you needna chap ony mair this forenoon. Just take the barry, and wheel eneuch metal frae yon quarry doon the road to mak anither bing the morn. My name's Alexander Trummle, and I've been seeven year at the trade, and twenty afore that herdin' on Leithen Water. My freens ca' me Ecky, and whiles Specky, for I wear glesses, being weak i' the sicht. Just you speak the Surveyor fair, and ca' him Sir, and he'll be fell pleased. I'll be back or midday."

I borrowed his spectacles and filthy old hat; stripped off coat, waistcoat, and collar, and gave him them to carry home; borrowed, too, the foul stump of a clay pipe as an extra property. He indicated my simple tasks, and without more ado set off at an amble bedwards. Bed may have been his chief object, but I think there was also something left in the foot of a bottle. I prayed that he might be safe under cover before my friends arrived on the scene.

Then I set to work to dress for the part. I opened the collar of my shirt—it was a vulgar blue-and-white check such as ploughmen wear—and revealed a neck as brown as any tinker's. I rolled up my sleeves, and there was a forearm which might have been a blacksmith's, sunburnt and rough with old scars. I got my boots and trouser-legs all white from the dust of the road, and hitched up my trousers, tying them with string below the knee. Then I set to work on my face. With a handful of dust I made a water-mark round my neck, the place where Mr. Turnbull's Sunday ablutions might be expected to stop. I rubbed a good deal of dirt also into the sunburn of my cheeks. A roadman's eyes would no doubt be a little inflamed, so I contrived to get some dust in both of mine, and by dint of vigorous rubbing produced a bleary effect.

The sandwiches Sir Harry had given me had gone off with my coat, but the roadman's lunch, tied up in a red handkerchief, was at my disposal. I ate with great relish several of the thick slabs of scone and cheese and drank a little of the cold tea. In the handkerchief was a local paper tied with string and addressed to Mr. Turnbull—obviously meant to solace his midday leisure. I did up the bundle again, and put the paper conspicuously beside it.

My boots did not satisfy me, but by dint of kicking among the stones I reduced them to the granite-like surface which marks a roadman's foot-gear. Then I bit and scraped my finger-nails till the edges were all cracked and uneven. The men I was matched against would miss no detail. I broke one of the bootlaces and retied it in a clumsy knot, and loosed

the other so that my thick grey socks bulged over the uppers. Still no sign of anything on the road. The motor I had observed half an hour ago must have gone home.

My toilet complete, I took up the barrow and began my journeys to and from the quarry a hundred yards off.

I remember an old scout in Rhodesia, who had done many queer things in his day, once telling me that the secret of playing a part was to think yourself into it. You could never keep it up, he said, unless you could manage to convince yourself that you were *it*. So I shut off all other thoughts and switched them on to the road-mending. I thought of the little white cottage as my home, I recalled the years I had spent herding on Leithen Water. I made my mind dwell lovingly on sleep in a box-bed and a bottle of cheap whisky. Still nothing appeared on that long white road.

Now and then a sheep wandered off the heather to stare at me. A heron flopped down to a pool in the stream and started to fish, taking no more notice of me than if I had been a milestone. On I went, trundling my loads of stone, with the heavy step of the professional. Soon I grew warm, and the dust on my face changed into solid and abiding grit. I was already counting the hours till evening should put a limit to Mr. Turnbull's monotonous toil.

Suddenly a crisp voice spoke from the road, and looking up I saw a little Ford two-seater, and a round-faced young man in a bowler hat.

"Are you Alexander Turnbull?" he asked. "I am the new County Road Surveyor. You live at

Blackhopecoot, and have charge of the section from Laidlawbyres to the Riggs? Good! A fair bit of road, Turnbull, and not badly engineered. A little soft about a mile off, and the edges want cleaning. See you look after that. Good-morning. You'll know me the next time you see me."

Clearly my get-up was good enough for the dreaded Surveyor. I went on with my work, and as the morning grew towards noon I was cheered by a little traffic. A baker's van breasted the hill, and sold me a bag of ginger biscuits which I stowed in my trouser-pockets against emergencies. Then a herd passed with sheep, and disturbed me somewhat by asking loudly, "What had become o' Specky?"

"In bed wi' the colic," I replied, and the herd passed on. . . .

Just about midday a big car stole down the hill, glided past and drew up a hundred yards beyond. Its three occupants descended as if to stretch their legs, and sauntered towards me.

Two of the men I had seen before from the window of the Galloway inn—one lean, sharp, and dark, the other comfortable and smiling. The third had the look of a countryman—a vet, perhaps, or a small farmer. He was dressed in ill-cut knicker-bockers, and the eye in his head was as bright and wary as a hen's.

"'Morning," said the last. "That's a fine easy job o' yours."

I had not looked up on their approach, and now, when accosted, I slowly and painfully straightened my back, after the manner of roadmen; spat vigorously, after the manner of the low Scot; and regarded

them steadily before replying. I confronted three pairs of eyes that missed nothing.

"There's waur jobs and there's better," I said sententiously. "I wad rather hae yours, sittin' a' day on your hinderlands on thae cushions. It's you and your muckle cawrs that wreck my roads! If we a' had oor richts, ye sud be made to mend what ye break."

The bright-eyed man was looking at the newspaper lying beside Turnbull's bundle.

"I see you get your papers in good time," he said.

I glanced at it casually. "Aye, in gude time. Seein' that that paper cam' out last Setterday I'm just sax days late."

He picked it up, glanced at the superscription, and laid it down again. One of the others had been looking at my boots, and a word in German called the speaker's attention to them.

"You've a fine taste in boots," he said. "These were never made by a country shoemaker."

"They were not," I said readily. "They were made in London. I got them frae the gentleman that was here last year for the shootin'. What was his name now?" And I scratched a forgetful head.

Again the sleek one spoke in German. "Let us get on," he said. "This fellow is all right."

They asked one last question.

"Did you see any one pass early this morning? He might be on a bicycle or he might be on foot."

I very nearly fell into the trap and told a story of a bicyclist hurrying past in the grey dawn. But I had the sense to see my danger. I pretended to consider very deeply.

"I wasna up very early," I said. "Ye see my dochter was merri last nicht, and we keepit it up late. I opened the house door about seeven and there was naebody on the road then. Since I cam' up here there has just been the baker and the Ruchill herd, besides you gentlemen."

One of them gave me a cigar, which I smelt gingerly and stuck in Turnbull's bundle. They got into their car and were out of sight in three minutes.

My heart leaped with an enormous relief, but I went on wheeling my stones. It was as well, for ten minutes later the car returned, one of the occupants waving a hand to me. Those gentry left nothing to chance.

I finished Turnbull's bread and cheese, and pretty soon I had finished the stones. The next step was what puzzled me. I could not keep up this road-making business for long. A merciful Providence had kept Mr. Turnbull indoors, but if he appeared on the scene there would be trouble. I had a notion that the cordon was still tight round the glen, and that if I walked in any direction I should meet with questioners. But get out I must. No man's nerve could stand more than a day of being spied on.

I stayed at my post till about five o'clock. By that time I had resolved to go down to Turnbull's cottage at nightfall and take my chance of getting over the hills in the darkness. But suddenly a new car came up the road, and slowed down a yard or two from me. A fresh wind had risen, and the occupant wanted to light a cigarette.

It was a touring car, with the tonneau full of an assortment of baggage. One man sat in it, and by an

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amazing chance I knew him. His name was Marmaduke Jopley, and he was an offence to creation. He was a sort of blood-stockbroker, who did his business by toadying eldest sons and rich young peers and foolish old ladies. "Marmie" was a familiar figure, I understood, at balls and polo-weeks and country houses. He was an adroit scandal-monger, and would crawl a mile on his belly to anything that had a title or a million. I had a business introduction to his firm when I came to London, and he was good enough to ask me to dinner at his club. There he showed off at a great rate, and pattered about his duchesses till the snobbery of the creature turned me sick. I asked a man afterwards why nobody kicked him, and was told that Englishmen revered the weaker sex.

Anyhow there he was now, nattily dressed, in a fine new car, obviously on his way to visit some of his smart friends. A sudden daftness took me, and in a second I had jumped into the tonneau and had him by the shoulder.

"Hullo, Jopley," I sang out. "Well met, my lad!"

He got a horrid fright. His chin dropped as he stared at me. "Who the devil are you?" he gasped.

"My name's Hannay," I said. "From Rhodesia, you remember."

"Good God, the murderer!" he choked.

"Just so. And there'll be a second murder, my dear, if you don't do as I tell you. Give me that coat of yours. That cap, too."

He did as he was bid, for he was blind with terror. Over my dirty trousers and vulgar shirt I put on his

smart driving-coat, which buttoned high at the top and thereby hid the deficiencies of my collar. I stuck the cap on my head, and added his gloves to my get-up. The dusty roadman in a minute was transformed into one of the neatest motorists in Scotland. On Mr. Jopley's head I clapped Turnbull's unspeakable hat, and told him to keep it there.

Then with some difficulty I turned the car. My plan was to go back the road he had come, for the watchers, having seen it before, would probably let it pass unremarked, and Marmie's figure was in no way like mine.

"Now, my child," I said, "sit quite still and be a good boy. I mean you no harm. I'm only borrowing your car for an hour or two. But if you play me any tricks, and above all if you open your mouth, as sure as there's a God above me I'll wring your neck. *Savez ?*"

I enjoyed that evening's ride. We ran eight miles down the valley, through a village or two, and I could not help noticing several strange-looking folk lounging by the roadside. These were the watchers who would have had much to say to me if I had come in other garb or company. As it was, they looked incuriously on. One touched his cap in salute, and I responded graciously.

As the dark fell I turned up a side glen which, as I remember from the map, led into an unfrequented corner of the hills. Soon the villages were left behind, then the farms, and then even the wayside cottages. Presently we came to a lonely moor where the night was blackening the sunset gleam in the bog pools. Here we stopped, and I obligingly re-

versed the car and restored to Mr. Jopley his belongings.

"A thousand thanks," I said. "There's more use in you than I thought. Now be off and find the police."

As I sat on the hillside, watching the tail light dwindle, I reflected on the various kinds of crime I had now sampled. Contrary to general belief, I was not a murderer, but I had become an unholy liar, a shameless impostor, and a highwayman with a marked taste for expensive motor-cars.

From "The Thirty-Nine Steps."

V

"SCALLY"

IAN HAY

I

"**B**ETTERSEA trem? Right, miss!"

My wife, who has been married long enough to feel deeply gratified at being mistaken for a maiden lady, smiled seraphically at the conductor, and allowed herself to be hoisted up the steps of the majestic vehicle provided by a paternal County Council to convey passengers—at a loss to the rate-payers, I understand—from the Victoria Embankment to Battersea.

Presently we ground our way round a curve, and began to cross Westminster Bridge. The conductor, whose innate Cockney *bonhomie* his high official position had failed to eradicate, presented himself before us and collected our fares.

"What part of Bettersea did you require, sir?" he asked of me.

I coughed, and answered evasively:

"Oh, about the middle."

"We haven't been there before," added my wife, quite gratuitously.

The conductor smiled indulgently and punched our tickets.

"I'll tell you when to get down," he said, and left us.

For some months we had been considering the question of buying a dog; and a good deal of our spare time—or perhaps I should say of my spare time, for a woman's time is naturally all her own—had been pleasantly occupied in discussing the matter. Having at length committed ourselves to the purchase of the animal, we proceeded to consider such details as breed, sex, and age. My wife vacillated between a bloodhound, because bloodhounds are so aristocratic in appearance, and a Pekinese, because they are *dernier cri*. (We like to be *dernier cri* even in Much Moreham.) Her younger sister Eileen, who spends a good deal of time with us, suggested an Old English sheep-dog, explaining that it would be company for my wife when I was away from home. I coldly recommended a mastiff. Our son John, aged three, upon being consulted, expressed a preference for twelve tigers in a box, and was not again invited to participate in the debate.

Finally we decided upon an Aberdeen terrier, of an age and sex to be settled by circumstances, and I was instructed to communicate with a gentleman in the North, who advertised in our morning paper that Aberdeen terriers were his speciality. In due course we received a reply. The advertiser recommended two animals—namely “Celtic Chief,” aged four months, and “Scotia's Pride,” aged one year. Pedigrees were enclosed, each about as complicated as the family tree of the House of Hapsburg; and the favour of an early reply was requested, as both dogs were being hotly bid for by an anonymous client in New York. The price of “Celtic Chief” was twenty guineas; that of “Scotia's Pride,” for reasons

heavily underlined in the pedigree, was twenty-seven. The advertiser (who was an Aberdonian) added that these prices did not cover cost of carriage. We decided not to stand in the way of the gentleman in New York, and having sent back the pedigrees by return of post, resumed the debate.

Finally Stella (my wife) said:

"We don't really want a dog with a pedigree. We only want something that will bark at beggars and be gentle with baby. Why not go to the Home for Lost Dogs at Battersea? I believe you can get any dog you like there for five shillings. We will run up to town next Wednesday and see about it—and I might get some clothes as well."

Hence our presence on the tram.

Presently the conductor, who had kindly pointed out to us such objects of local interest as the River Thames and the Houses of Parliament, stopped the tram in a crowded thoroughfare and announced that we were in Battersea.

"Alight here," he announced facetiously, "for the 'Ome for Lost Dawgs!"

Guiltily realising that there is many a true word spoken in jest, we obeyed him, and the tram went rocking and whizzing out of sight.

We had eschewed a cab.

"When you are only going to pay five shillings for a dog," my wife had pointed out with convincing logic, "it is silly to go and pay perhaps another five shillings for a cab. It doubles the price of the dog at once. If we had been buying an expensive dog we might have taken a cab; but not for a five-shilling one."

"Now," I inquired briskly, "how are we going to find this place?"

"Haven't you any idea where it is?"

"No. I have a sort of vague notion that it is on an island in the middle of the river—called the Isle of Dogs, or Barking Reach, or something like that. However, I have no doubt——"

"Hadn't we better ask someone?" suggested Stella.

I demurred.

"If there is one thing I dislike," I said, "it is accosting total strangers and badgering them for information which they don't possess. Not that that will prevent them from giving it. If we start asking the way we shall find ourselves in Putney or Woolwich in no time."

"Yes, dear," said Stella soothingly.

"Now I suggest——" My hand went to my pocket.

"No, darling," interposed my wife hastily; "*not* a map, please!" (It is a curious psychological fact that women have a constitutional aversion to maps and railway time-tables. They would sooner consult an unprincipled errand-boy or a half-witted railway porter.) "Do not let us make a spectacle of ourselves in the public streets again! I have not yet forgotten the day when you tried to find the Crystal Palace. Besides, it will only blow away. Ask that dear little boy there. He is looking at us so wistfully"

Yes, I admit it was criminal folly. A man who asks a London street-boy to be so kind as to direct him to a Home for Lost Dogs has only himself to thank for the consequences.

The wistful little boy smiled up at us. He had a pinched face and large eyes.

"Lost Dogs' 'Ome, sir?" he said courteously. "It's a good long way. Did you want to get there quick?"

"Yes."

"Then if I was you, sir," replied the infant, edging to the mouth of an alleyway, "I should bite a policeman!"

And with an ear-splitting yell, he vanished.

We walked on, hot-faced.

"Little wretch!" said Stella.

"We simply asked for it," I rejoined. "What are we going to do next?"

My question was answered in a most incredible fashion, for at this moment a man emerged from a shop on our right, and set off down the street before us. He wore a species of uniform, and emblazoned upon the front of his hat was the information that he was an official of the Battersea Home for Lost and Starving Dogs.

"Wait a minute, and I will ask him," I said, starting forward.

But my wife would not hear of it.

"Certainly not," she replied. "If we ask him he will simply offer to show us the way. Then we shall have to talk to him—about hydrophobia, and lethal chambers, and distemper—and it may be for miles. I simply couldn't *bear* it. We shall have to tip him, too. Let us follow him, quietly."

To those who have never attempted to track a fellow-creature surreptitiously through the streets of London on a hot day the feat may appear simple.

It is in reality a most exhausting, dilatory, and humiliating exercise. Our difficulty lay not so much in keeping our friend in sight as in avoiding frequent and unexpected collisions with him. The general idea, as they say on field-days, was to keep about twenty yards behind him ; but under certain circumstances distance has an uncanny habit of annihilating itself. The man himself was no hustler. Once or twice he stopped to light his pipe, or converse with a friend. During these interludes Stella and I loafed guiltily upon the pavement, pointing out to one another objects of local interest with the fatuous officiousness of people in the foreground of railway posters advertising health-resorts. Occasionally he paused to contemplate the contents of a shop window. We gazed industriously into the window next door. Our first window, I recollect, was an undertaker's, with ready-printed expressions of grief for sale upon white porcelain discs. We had time to read them all—from "In Lasting Memory of Our Dear Mother" to "A Token of Respect from the Choir." The next was a butcher's. Here we stayed, perforce, so long that the proprietor, who was of the tribe which disposes of its wares almost entirely by personal canvas, came out into the street and endeavoured to sell us a bullock's heart.

Our quarry's next proceeding was to dive into a public-house.

We turned and surveyed one another.

"What are we to do now?" inquired my wife.

"Go inside too," I replied, with more enthusiasm than I had hitherto displayed. "At least I think I ought to. You can please yourself."

"I will not be left in the street," said Stella firmly. "We must just wait here together until he comes out."

"There may be another exit," I objected. "We had better go in. I shall take something, just to keep up appearances, and you must sit down in the Ladies' Bar, or the Snug, or whatever they call it."

"Certainly not!" said Stella.

We had arrived at this *impasse* when the man suddenly reappeared, wiping his mouth. Instantly and silently we fell in behind him.

For the first time the man appeared to notice our presence. He regarded us curiously, with a faint gleam of recognition in his eyes, and then set off down the street at a good round pace. We followed, panting. Once or twice he looked back over his shoulder—a little apprehensively, I thought. But we ploughed on.

"We ought to get there soon at this pace," I gasped. "Hallo, he's gone again!"

"He turned down to the right," said Stella excitedly.

The lust of the chase was fairly on us now. We swung eagerly round the corner into a quiet by-street. Our man was nowhere to be seen, and the street was almost empty.

"Come on!" said Stella. "He may have turned in somewhere."

We hurried down the street. Suddenly, warned by a newly awakened and primæval instinct, I looked back. We had over-run our quarry. He had just emerged from some hiding-place of his own, and was

heading back towards the main street, looking fearfully over his shoulder.

Once more we were in full cry. . . .

For the next five minutes we practically ran—all three of us. The man was obviously frightened out of his wits, and kept making frenzied and spasmodic spurts, from which we surmised that he was getting to the end of his powers of endurance.

"If only we could overtake him," I said, hauling my exhausted spouse along by the arm, "we could explain that——"

"He's gone again!" exclaimed Stella.

She was right. The man had turned another corner. We followed him round, hot-foot, and found ourselves in a prim little *cul-de-sac*, with villas on either side. Across the end of the street ran a high wall, obviously screening a railway track.

"We've got him!" I exclaimed, feeling as Moltke must have felt when he closed the circle at Sedan.

"But where is the Dogs' Home, dear?" inquired Stella.

The question was never answered, for at this moment the man ran up the steps of the fourth villa on the left and slipped a latch-key into the lock. The door closed behind him with a venomous snap, and we were left alone in the street, guideless and dogless.

A minute later the man appeared at the ground-floor window, accompanied by a female of commanding appearance. He pointed us out to her. Behind them, dimly, we could descry a white tablecloth, a tea-cosy, and covered dishes.

The commanding female, after a prolonged and

withering glare, plucked a hairpin from her head and ostentatiously proceeded to skewer together the starched white curtains which framed the window. Privacy secured, and the sanctity of the English home thus pointedly vindicated, she and her husband disappeared into the murky background, where they doubtless sat down to an excellent high tea.

Exhausted and discomfited, we drifted away.

"I am going home," said Stella in a hollow voice. "And I think," she added bitterly, "that it might have occurred to you to suggest that the man might possibly be going *from* the Dogs' Home, and not to it."

I apologised. It is the simplest plan, really.

II

It was almost dark when the train arrived at our little country station. We set out to walk home by the short cut across the golf-course.

"Anyhow, we have saved five shillings," remarked Stella.

"We paid half-a-crown for the taxi which took us back to Victoria Station," I reminded her.

"Do not argue to-night, darling," responded my wife. "I simply cannot endure anything more."

Plainly she was a little unstrung. Very considerably I selected another topic.

"I think our best plan," I said cheerfully, "would be to advertise for a dog."

"I never wish to see a dog again," replied Stella.

I surveyed her with some concern, and said gently :

"I am afraid you are tired, dear."

"No, I'm not."

"A little shaken, perhaps?"

"Nothing of the kind. *Joe, what is that?*"

Stella's fingers bit deep into my biceps muscle, causing me considerable pain. We were passing a small sheet of water, which guards the thirteenth green on the golf-course. It is a stagnant and unclean pool, but we make rather a fuss of it. We call it the Lake, and if you play a ball into it you send a blasphemous caddie in after it and count one stroke.

A young moon was struggling up over the trees, dimly illuminating the scene. Upon the slimy shores of the pool we beheld a small moving object. A yard behind it was another object, a little smaller, moving at exactly the same pace. One of the objects was emitting sounds of distress.

Abandoning my quaking consort, I advanced to the edge of the pond and leaned down to investigate the mystery.

The leading object proved to be a small, wet, shivering, whimpering puppy. The satellite was a brick. The two were connected by a string. The puppy had just emerged from the depths of the pool, towing the brick behind it.

"What is it, dear?" repeated Stella fearfully.

"Your dog!" I replied, and cut the string.

III

We spent three days deciding upon a name for him. Stella suggested Tiny, on account of his size. I pointed out that time might stultify this selection of a title.

"I don't think so," said Eileen, supporting her sister. (She usually does.) "That kind of dog does not grow very big."

"What kind of dog is he?" I inquired swiftly.

Eileen said no more. There are problems which even young women of twenty cannot solve.

A warm bath had revealed to us the fact that the puppy was of a dingy yellow hue. I suggested that we should call him "Mustard." Our son John, on being consulted (against my advice) by his mother, addressed the animal as "Pussy." Stella continued to favour "Tiny." Finally Eileen, who was at the romantic age, produced a copy of Tennyson and suggested "Excalibur," alleging in support of her preposterous proposition that

"It rose from out the bosom of the lake."

"The darling rose from out the bosom of the lake, too, just like the sword of Excalibur," she said, "so I think it would make a lovely name for him."

"The little brute waded out of a muddy pond towing a brick," I replied. "I see no parallel. He was not the product of the pond. Some one must have thrown him in, and he came out."

"That is just," retorted Eileen, "what some one must have done with the sword. So we'll call you Excalibur, won't we, darling little Scally?"

She embraced the puppy warmly, and the unsuspecting animal replied by frantically licking her face.

However, the name stuck—with variations. When the puppy was big enough he was presented with a collar engraved with the name "Excalibur," together

with my name and address. Among ourselves we usually addressed him as "Scally." The children in the village called him "The Scallywag."

His time during his first year in our household was fully occupied in growing up. Stella declared that if one could have persuaded him to stand still for five minutes it would have been actually possible to see him grow. He grew at the rate of about an inch per week for the best part of a year. When he had finished he looked like nothing on earth. At one time we cherished a brief but illusory hope that he was going to turn into some sort of an imitation of a St. Bernard; but the symptoms rapidly passed off, and his final and permanent aspect was that of a rather badly-stuffed lion.

Like most overgrown creatures, he was top-heavy and lethargic, and very humble-minded. Still, there was a kind of respectful pertinacity about him. It requires some strength of character, for instance, to wade along the bottom of a pond to dry land accompanied by a brick as big as yourself. It was quite impossible, too, short of locking him up, to prevent him from accompanying us when we took our walks abroad, if he had made up his mind to do so. The first time this happened I was going to shoot with some neighbours. It was only a mile to the first covert, and I set off after breakfast to walk. I was hardly out upon the road when Excalibur was beside me, ambling uncertainly upon his weedy legs and smiling up into my face with an air of imbecile affection.

"You have many qualities, old friend," I said, "but I don't think you are a sporting dog. Go home!"

Excalibur sat down upon the road with a dejected

air. Then, having given me fifty yards' start, he rose and crawled sheepishly after me. I stopped, called him up, pointed him with some difficulty in the required direction, gave him a resounding spank, and bade him begone. He responded by collapsing like a camp bedstead, and I left him.

Two minutes later I looked round. Excalibur was ten yards behind me, propelling himself along upon his stomach. This time I thrashed him severely. After he had begun to howl I let him go, and he lumbered away homeward the picture of misery.

In due course I reached the cross-roads where I had arranged to meet the rest of the party. They had not arrived, but Excalibur had. He had made a detour and headed me off. Not certain which route I would take after the cross-roads, he was sitting, very sensibly under the signpost, awaiting my arrival. On seeing me he immediately came forward, wagging his tail, and placed himself at my feet in the position most convenient to me for inflicting chastisement.

I wonder how many of our human friends would be willing to pay such a price for the pleasure of our company.

As time went on Excalibur filled out into one of the most terrifying spectacles I have ever beheld. In one respect, though, he lived up to his knightly name. His manners were of the most courtly description, and he had an affectionate greeting for all—beggars included. He was particularly fond of children. If he saw children in the distance he would canter up and offer to play with them. If the children had not met him before they would run shrieking to their nurses. If they had, they would fall upon Excalibur

in a body and roll him over and pull him about. On wet afternoons in the nursery my own family used to play at "dentist" with him, assigning to Excalibur the rôle of patient. Gas was administered with a bicycle pump, and a shoehorn and button-hook were employed in place of the ordinary instruments of torture. But Excalibur did not mind. He lay on his back upon the hearthrug, with the principal dentist sitting astride his stomach, as happy as a king. He was particularly attracted by babies; and being able by reason of his stature to look right down into perambulators, was accustomed whenever he met one of these vehicles to amble alongside and peer inquiringly into the face of its occupant. Most of the babies in the district got to know him in time, but until they did we had to attend to a good deal of correspondence upon the subject.

Excalibur's intellect may have been lofty, but his memory was treacherous. Our household will never forget the day upon which he was given the shoulder of mutton.

One morning after breakfast Eileen, accompanied by Excalibur, intercepted the kitchen-maid hastening in the direction of the potting-shed, carrying the joint in question at arm's length. The damsel explained that its premature maturity was due to the recent warm weather, and that she was even now in search of the gardener's boy, who would be commissioned to perform the duties of sexton.

"It seems a waste, miss," observed the kitchen-maid, "but cook says it can't be ate nohow, now."

Loud but respectful snufflings from Excalibur moved a direct negative to this statement. Eileen

and the kitchen-maid, who were both criminally weak where Excalibur was concerned, saw a way to gratify their economical instincts and their natural affection simultaneously. Next moment Excalibur was lurching contentedly down the gravel path, with a presentation shoulder of mutton in his mouth.

Then Joy Day began. Excalibur took his prize into the middle of the tennis-lawn. It was a very large shoulder of mutton, but Excalibur finished it in ten minutes. After that, distended to his utmost limits, he went to sleep in the sun, with the bone between his paws. Occasionally he woke up, and raising his head stared solemnly into space, in the attitude of a Trafalgar Square lion. The bone now lay white and gleaming upon the grass beside him. Then he fell asleep again. About four o'clock he roused himself, and began to look for a suitable place of interment for the bone. By four-thirty the deed was done, and he went to sleep once more. At five he woke up—and pandemonium began. He could not remember where he had buried that bone.

He started systematically with the rose-beds, but met with no success. After that he tried two or three shrubberies, without avail; and then embarked upon a frantic but thorough excavation of the tennis-lawn. We were taking tea upon the lawn at the time, and our attention was first drawn to Excalibur's bereavement by a temporary but unshakable conviction on his part that the bone was buried immediately underneath the tea-table.

As the tennis-lawn was fast beginning to resemble a golf-links, we locked Excalibur up in the wash-house, where his hyena-like howls rent the air for the

rest of the evening, penetrating even to the dining-room. This was particularly unfortunate, because we were having a dinner party in honour of a neighbour who had recently come to the district—no less a personage, in fact, than the new Lord-Lieutenant of the county and his lady. Stella was naturally anxious that there should be no embarrassments upon such an occasion, and it distressed her to think that these people should imagine that we kept a private torture-chamber on the premises.

However, dinner passed off quite successfully, and we adjourned to the drawing-room. It was a chilly September evening, and Lady Wickham was accommodated with a seat by the fire in a large arm-chair with a cushion at her back. When the gentlemen came in Eileen sang to us. Fortunately the drawing-room is out of range of the wash-house.

During Eileen's first song I sat by Lady Wickham. Her expression was one of patrician calm and well-bred repose, but it seemed to me that she was not looking quite comfortable. I was not feeling quite comfortable myself. The atmosphere seemed a trifle oppressive; perhaps we had done wrong in having a fire after all. Lacy Wickham appeared to notice it too. She sat very upright, fanning herself mechanically, and seemed disinclined to lean back in her chair.

After the song was finished I said :

"I am afraid you are not quite comfortable, Lady Wickham. Let me get you a larger cushion."

"Thank you," said Lady Wickham; "the cushion I have is delightfully comfortable; but I think there is something hard behind it."

Apologetically I plucked away the cushion. Lady Wickham was right ; there was something behind it. It was Excalibur's bone.

IV

A walk along the village street was always a great event for Excalibur. Still, it must have contained many humiliating moments for one of his sensitive disposition ; for he was always pathetically anxious to make friends with other dogs and was rarely successful. Little dogs merely bit his legs, while big dogs cut him dead.

I think this was why he usually commenced his morning round by calling on a rabbit. The rabbit lived in a hutch in a yard at the end of a passage between two cottages—the first turning on the right after you entered the village—and Excalibur always dived down this at the earliest opportunity. It was no use for Eileen (who usually took him out on these occasions) to endeavour to hold him back. Either Excalibur called on the rabbit by himself or Eileen went with him : there was no other alternative.

Arrived at the hutch, Excalibur wagged his tail and contemplated the rabbit with his usual air of vacuous benevolence. The rabbit made not the faintest response, but continued to munch green food, twitching its nose in a superior manner. Finally, when it could endure Excalibur's admiring inspection and hard breathing no longer, it turned its back and retired into its bedroom.

Excalibur's next call was usually at the butcher's, where he was presented with a specially selected and

quite unsaleable fragment of meat. He then crossed the road to the baker's, where he purchased a half-penny bun, for which his escort was expected to pay. After that he walked from shop to shop, wherever he was taken, with great docility and enjoyment; for he was a gregarious animal and had a friend behind or underneath almost every counter in the village. Men, women, babies, kittens, even ducks—they were all one to him.

At one time Eileen had endeavoured to teach him a few simple accomplishments, such as begging for food, dying for his country, and carrying parcels. She was unsuccessful in all three instances. Excalibur upon his hind legs stood about five feet six, and when he fell from that eminence, as he invariably did when he tried to beg, he usually broke something. He was hampered, too, by inability to distinguish one order from another. More than once he narrowly escaped with his life through mistaking an urgent appeal to come to heel out of the way of an approaching motor for a command to die for his country in the middle of the road. As for educating him to carry parcels, a single attempt was sufficient. The parcel in question contained a miscellaneous assortment of articles from the grocer's, including lard, soap, and safety matches. It was securely tied up, and the grocer kindly attached it by a short length of string to a wooden clothes-peg in order to make it easier for Excalibur to carry. They set off home. . . .

Excalibur was most apologetic about it afterwards, besides being extremely unwell. But he had no idea, he explained to Eileen, that anything put into his mouth was not meant to be eaten. He then tendered

the clothes-peg and some mangled brown paper with an air of profound abasement. After that no further attempts at compulsory education were undertaken.

But it was his daily walk with Eileen which introduced *Excalibur to Life*—Life in its broadest and most romantic sense. As I was not privileged to be present at the opening incident of this episode, or most of its subsequent developments, the direct conduct of this narrative here passes out of my hands.

One sunny morning in July a young man in clerical attire sat breakfasting in his rooms at Mrs. Tice's. Mrs. Tice's establishment was situated in the village street, and Mrs. Tice was in the habit of letting her ground-floor to lodgers of impeccable respectability.

It was half-past eleven, which is a late hour for the clergy to breakfast, but this young man appeared to be suffering from no qualms of conscience upon the subject. He was making an excellent breakfast, and reading the Henley results from *The Sportsman* with a mixture of rapture and longing.

He had just removed *The Sportsman* from the convenient buttress of the teapot and substituted *Punch*, when he became aware that day had turned to night. Looking up, he perceived that his open window, which was rather small and of the casement variety, was completely blocked by a huge, shapeless, and opaque mass. Next moment the mass resolved itself into an animal of enormous size, and surprising appearance, which fell heavily into the room, and—

"Like a stream that, spouting from a cliff,
Falls in mid-air: but gathering at the base,
Remakes itself,"

—rose to its feet, and, advancing to the table, laid a heavy head upon the white cloth and lovingly passed its tongue (which resembled that of the great ant-eater) round a cold chicken conveniently adjacent.

Five minutes later the window framed another picture—this time a girl of twenty, white-clad, and wearing a powder-blue felt hat caught up on one side by a silver buckle, which twinkled in the hot morning sun. The Curate started to his feet. Excalibur, who was now lying upon the hearthrug dismembering the chicken, thumped his tail guiltily upon the floor, but made no attempt to rise.

"I am very sorry," said Eileen, "but I am afraid my dog is trespassing. May I call him out?"

"Certainly," said the Curate. "But"—he racked his brains to devise some means of delaying the departure of this radiant, fragrant vision—"he is not the least in the way. I am very glad of his company: I think it was most neighbourly of him to call. After all, I suppose he is one of my parishioners? And—and"—he blushed painfully—"I hope you are, too."

Eileen gave him her most entrancing smile, and from that hour the Curate ceased to be his own master.

"I suppose you are Mr. Gilmore," said Eileen.

"Yes. I have only been here three weeks, and I have not met everyone yet."

"I have been away for two months," Eileen mentioned.

"I thought you must have been," said the Curate, —rather subtly for him.

"I think my brother-in-law called upon you a few days ago," continued Eileen, upon whom the Curate's

last remark had made a most favourable impression. She mentioned my name.

"I was going to return the call this very afternoon," said the Curate. And he firmly believed that he was speaking the truth. "Won't you come in? We have an excellent chaperon"—indicating Excalibur. "I will come and open the door."

"Well, he certainly won't come out unless I come and fetch him," admitted Eileen thoughtfully.

A moment later the Curate was at the front door, and led his visitor across the little hall into the sitting-room. He had not been absent more than thirty seconds, but during that time a plateful of sausages had mysteriously disappeared; and as they entered, Excalibur was apologetically settling down upon the hearthrug with a cottage loaf.

Eileen uttered cries of dismay and apology, but the Curate would have none of them.

"My fault entirely!" he insisted. "I have no right to be breakfasting at this hour. But this is my day off. I take early service every morning at seven; but on Wednesdays we cut it ou—— omit it, and have full Matins at ten. So I get up at half-past nine, take service at ten, and come back at eleven and have breakfast. It is my weekly treat."

"You deserve it," said Eileen feelingly. Her religious exercises were limited to going to church on Sunday morning and coming out, if possible, after the Litany. "And how do you like Much Moreham?"

"I did not like it at all when I came," said the Curate; "but recently I have begun to enjoy myself immensely." He did not say how recently.

"Were you in London before?"

"Yes—in the East End. It was pretty hard work, but a useful experience. I feel rather lost here during my spare time. I get so little exercise. In London I used to slip away for an occasional outing in a Leander scratch eight, and that kept me fit. I am inclined," he added ruefully, "to put on flesh."

"Leander? Are you a Blue?"

The Curate nodded.

"You know about rowing, I see," he said appreciatively. "The worst of rowing," he continued, "is that it takes up so much of a man's time that he has no opportunity of practising anything else. Cricket, for instance. All curates ought to be able to play cricket. I do my best, but there isn't a single boy in the Sunday-school who can't bowl me. It's humiliating!"

"Do you play tennis at all?" asked Eileen.

"Yes, in a way."

"I am sure my sister will be pleased if you will come and have a game with us one afternoon."

The enraptured Curate had already opened his mouth to accept this demure invitation when Excalibur, rising from the hearthrug, stretched himself luxuriously and wagged his tail, thereby removing three pipes, an inkstand, a tobacco-jar, and a half-completed sermon from the writing-table.

V

Excalibur was heavily overworked in his new rôle of chaperon during the next three or four weeks, and any dog less ready to oblige than himself might have felt a little aggrieved at the treatment to which he was subjected.

There was the case of the tennis-lawn, for instance. He had always regarded this as his own particular sanctuary, dedicated to reflection and repose. But now the net was stretched across it, and Eileen and the Curate performed antics all over the court with rackets and small white balls which, though they did not hurt Excalibur, kept him awake. It did not occur to him to convey himself elsewhere, for his mind moved slowly; and the united blandishments of the players failed to bring the desirability of such a course home to him. He continued to lie on his favourite spot upon the sunny side of the court, looking injured but forgiving, or slumbering perseveringly amid the storm that raged around him. It was quite impossible to move Excalibur once he had decided to remain where he was, so Eileen and the Curate agreed to regard him as a sort of artificial excrescence—like the buttress in a fives court. If the ball hit him—as it frequently did—the player waiting for it was at liberty either to play it or claim a let. This arrangement added a piquant and pleasing variety to what is too often—especially when indulged in by mediocre players—a very dull game.

But worse was to follow. One day Eileen and the Curate conducted Excalibur to a neighbouring mountain-range—at least, so it appeared to Excalibur—and played another ball game. This time they employed long sticks with iron heads, and two balls, which, though they were much smaller than the tennis balls, were incredibly hard and painful. Excalibur, though willing to help and anxious to please, could not supervise both these balls at once. As sure as he ran to retrieve one the other came after him and took

him unfairly in the rear. Excalibur was the gentlest of creatures, but the most perfect gentleman has his dignity to consider. After having been struck for the third time by one of these balls, he whipped round, picked it up in his mouth, and gave it a tiny pinch—just for a warning. At least, he thought it was a tiny pinch. The ball retaliated, with unexpected ferocity. It twisted and turned. It emitted long snaky spirals of some elastic substance, which clogged his teeth and tickled his throat and wound themselves round his tongue and nearly choked him. Panic-stricken, he ran to his mistress, who, with weeping and with laughter, removed the writhing horror from his jaws, and comforted him with fair words.

After that Excalibur realised that it is wiser to walk behind golfers than in front of them. But it was boring business, and very exhausting, for he loathed exercise of any kind; and his only periods of repose were the occasions upon which the expedition came to a halt on certain small flat lawns, each of which contained a hole with a flag in it. Here Excalibur would lie down with the contented sigh of a tired child, and go to sleep. As he almost invariably lay down between the hole and the ball, the players agreed to regard him as a bunker. Eileen putted round him; but the Curate, who had little regard for the humbler works of creation, Excalibur thought, used to take his mashie and attempt a lofting shot—an enterprise in which he almost invariably failed, to Excalibur's great inconvenience. ✕

Country walks were more tolerable, for Eileen's supervision of his movements, which was usually marked by an officious severity, was sensibly relaxed

in these days ; and Excalibur found himself at liberty to range abroad amid the heath and through the coppices, engaged in a pastime which he imagined was hunting.

One hot afternoon, wandering into a clearing, he encountered a hare. The hare, which was suffering from extreme panic owing to a terrifying noise behind—the blast of something quite exceptional in the way of profiteers' motor-horns, to be precise—was bolting right across the clearing. After the manner of hares where objects directly in front of them are concerned, the fugitive entirely failed to perceive Excalibur, and indeed ran right underneath him on its way to cover. Excalibur was so unstrung by this adventure that he ran back to where he had left Eileen and the Curate.

They were sitting side by side upon the grass, and the Curate was holding Eileen's hand.

Excalibur advanced upon them thankfully, and indicated by an ingratiating smile that a friendly remark or other recognition of his presence would be gratefully received. But neither took the slightest notice of him. They continued to gaze straight before them, in a mournful and abstracted fashion. They looked not so much *at* Excalibur as *through* him. First the hare, then Eileen and the Curate ! Excalibur began to fear that he had become invisible—or at least transparent. Greatly agitated, he drifted away into a neighbouring plantation, full of young pheasants. Here he encountered a keeper, who was able to dissipate his gloomy suspicions for him without any difficulty whatsoever.

But Eileen and the Curate sat on.

"A hundred pounds a year!" repeated the Curate. "A pass degree, and no influence! I can't preach, and I have no money of my own. Dearest, I ought never to have told you."

"Told me what?" inquired Eileen softly. She knew quite well, but she was a woman; and a woman can never let well alone.

The Curate, turning to Eileen, delivered himself of a statement of three words. Eileen's reply was whispered *in quoque*.

"It had to happen, dear," she added cheerfully, for she did not share the Curate's burden of responsibility in the matter. "If you had not told me, we should have been miserable separately. Now that you have told me, we can be miserable together. And when two people who—who——" She hesitated.

The Curate completed the relative sentence. Eileen nodded her head in acknowledgment.

"Yes; who are—like you and me, are miserable together, they are happy! See?"

"I see," said the Curate gravely. "Yes, you are right there. But we can't go on living on a diet of joint misery. We shall have to face the future. What are we going to do about it?"

Then Eileen spoke up boldly for the first time.

"Gerald," she said, "we shall simply have to manage on a hundred a year."

But the Curate shook his head.

"Dearest, I should be an utter cad if I allowed you to do such a thing," he said. "A hundred a year is less than two pounds a week."

"A lot of people live on less than two pounds a week," Eileen pointed out longingly.

"Yes, I know. If we could rent a three-shilling cottage, and I could go about with a spotted handkerchief round my neck, and you could scrub the doorstep, *coram populo*, we might be very comfortable. But the clergy belong to the black-coated class, and people in the lower ranks of the black-coated class are the poorest people in the whole wide world. They have to spend money on luxuries—collars, and charwomen, and so on—which a working-man can spend entirely on necessities. It wouldn't merely mean no pretty dresses and a lot of hard work for you, Eileen. It would mean Starvation. Believe me, I know! Some of my friends have tried it, and I know!"

"What happened to them?" asked Eileen fearfully.

"They all had to come down in the end—some soon, some late, but all in time—to taking parish relief."

"Parish relief?"

"Yes. Not official, regulation, rate-aided charity, but the infinitely more humiliating charity of their well-to-do neighbours. Quiet cheques, second-hand dresses, and things like that. No, little girl, you and I are too proud—too proud of the Cloth—for that. We will never give a handle to the people who are always waiting to have a fling at the improvident clergy—not if it breaks our hearts we won't!"

"You are quite right, dear," said Eileen quietly. "We must wait."

Then the Curate said the most difficult thing he had said yet.

"I shall have to go away from here."

Eileen's hand turned cold in his.

"Why?" she whispered; but she knew.

"Because if we wait here, we shall wait for ever. The last curate in Much Moreham—what happened to him?"

"He died."

"Yes—at fifty-five; and he had been here for thirty years. Preferment does not come in sleepy villages. I must go back to London."

"The East End?"

"East or South or North—it doesn't signify. Anywhere but West. In the East and South and North there is always work to be done—hard work. And if a parson has no money and no brains and no influence and can only work—run clothing-clubs and soup-kitchens, and reclaim drunkards—London is the place for him. So off I go to London, my beloved, to lay the foundations of Paradise for you and me—for you and me!"

There was a long silence. Then the pair rose to their feet, and smiled upon one another extremely cheerfully, because each suspected the other (rightly) of low spirits.

"Shall we tell people?" asked the Curate.

Eileen thought, and shook her head.

"No," she said. "Nicer not. It will make a splendid secret."

"Just between us two—eh?" said the Curate, kindling at the thought.

"Just between us two," agreed Eileen. And the Curate kissed her, very solemnly. A secret is a comfortable thing to lovers, especially when they are young and about to be lonely.

At this moment a leonine head, supported upon a

lumbering and ill-balanced body, was thrust in between them. It was Excalibur, taking sanctuary with the Church from the vengeance of the Law.

"We might tell Scally, I think," said Eileen.

"Rather!" assented the Curate. "He introduced us."

So Eileen communicated the great news to Excalibur.

"You do approve, dear, don't you?" she said.

Excalibur, instinctively realising that this was an occasion upon which liberties might be taken, stood upon his hind legs and placed his fore-paws on his mistress's shoulders. The Curate supported them both.

"And you will use your influence to get us a living wage from somewhere, won't you, old man?" added the Curate.

Excalibur tried to lick both their faces at once—and succeeded.

VI

So the Curate went away, but not to London. He was sent instead to a great manufacturing town in the North, where the work was equally hard, and where Anglican and Roman and Salvationist fought grimly side by side against the powers of drink and disease and crime. During these days, which ultimately rolled into years, the Curate lost his boyish freshness and his unfortunate tendency to put on flesh. He grew thin and lathy; and although his smile was as ready and as magnetic as ever, he seldom laughed.

But he never failed to write a cheerful letter to

Eileen every Monday morning. He was getting two hundred pounds a year now, so his chances of becoming a millionaire had been doubled, he said.

Meanwhile, his two confederates Excalibur and Eileen continued to reside at Much Moreham. Eileen was still the recognised beauty of the district, but she spread her net less promiscuously than of yore. Girl friends she always had in plenty, but it was noticed that she avoided intimacy with all eligible males of over twenty and under forty-five years of age. No one knew the reason of this, except Excalibur. Eileen used to read Gerald's letters aloud to him every Tuesday morning : sometimes the letter contained a friendly message to Excalibur himself. In acknowledgment of this courtesy Excalibur always sent his love to the Curate—Eileen wrote every Friday—and he and Eileen walked together, rain or shine, on Friday afternoons to post the letter in the next village. Much Moreham post office was too small to remain oblivious to such a regular correspondence.

But the Curate was seen no more in his old parish. Railway journeys are costly things, and curates' holidays rare. Besides, he had no overt excuse for coming. And so life went on for five years. The Curate and Eileen may have met during that period, for Eileen sometimes went away visiting ; and as Excalibur was not privileged to accompany her upon these occasions he had no means of checking her movements. But the chances are that she never saw the Curate, or I think she would have told Excalibur about it. We simply have to tell some one.

Then, quite suddenly, came a tremendous change in Excalibur's life. Eileen's brother-in-law—he was

Excalibur's master no longer, for Excalibur had been transferred to Eileen by deed of gift, at her own request, on her first birthday after the Curate's departure—fell ill. There was an operation, and a crisis, and a deal of unhappiness at Much Moreham : then came convalescence, followed by directions for a sea voyage for six months. It was arranged that the house should be shut up, and the children sent to their grandmother at Bath.

"That settles everything and everybody," said the gaunt man on the sofa, "except you, Eileen. What about you?"

"What about Scally?" inquired Eileen.

Her brother-in-law apologetically admitted that he had forgotten Scally.

"Not quite myself at present," he mentioned in extenuation.

"I am going to Aunt Phœbe," announced Eileen.

"You are never going to introduce Scally into Aunt Phœbe's establishment!" cried Eileen's sister.

"No," said Eileen, "I am not." She rubbed Excalibur's matted head affectionately. "But I have arranged for the dear man's future. He is going to visit friends in the North. Aren't you, darling?"

Excalibur, to whom this arrangement had been privately communicated some days before, wagged his tail and endeavoured to look as intelligent and knowing as possible. He was not going to put his beloved mistress to shame by admitting to her relatives that he had not the faintest idea what she was talking about.

However, he was soon to understand. Next day Eileen took him up to London by train. This in

itself was a tremendous adventure, though alarming at first. He travelled in the guard's van, it having been found quite impossible to get him into an ordinary compartment—or rather to get anyone else into the compartment after he had lain down upon the floor. So he travelled with the guard, chained to the vacuum brake, and shared that kindly official's dinner.

When they reached the terminus there was much bustle and confusion. The door of the van was thrown open, and porters dragged out the luggage and submitted samples thereof to overheated passengers, who invariably failed to recognise their own property and claimed someone else's. Finally, when the luggage was all cleared out, the guard took off Excalibur's chain and facetiously invited him to alight here for London town. Excalibur, lumbering delicately across the ribbed floor of the van, arrived at the open doorway. Outside upon the platform he espied Eileen. Beside her stood a tall figure in black.

With one tremendous roar of rapturous recognition, Excalibur leaped straight out of the van and launched himself fairly and squarely at the Curate's chest. Luckily the Curate saw him coming.

"He knows you all right," said Eileen with satisfaction.

"He appears to," replied the Curate. "Afraid I don't dance the tango, Scally, old man. But thanks for the invitation, all the same!"

Excalibur spent the rest of the day in London, where it must be admitted that he caused a genuine sensation—no mean feat in such a *blasé* place. In Bond Street the traffic had to be held up both ways

by benevolent policemen, because Excalibur, feeling pleasantly tired, lay down to rest across the narrowest part.

When evening came they all dined together in a cheap little restaurant in Soho, and were very gay—with the gaiety of people who are whistling to keep their courage up. After dinner Eileen said good-bye first to Excalibur and then to the Curate. She was much more demonstrative towards the former than the latter, which is the way of women. Then the Curate put Eileen into a taxi, and having, with the aid of the commissionaire, extracted Excalibur from underneath—he had gone there under some confused impression that it was the guard's van again—said good-bye for the last time; and Eileen, smiling bravely, was whirled away out of sight.

As the taxi turned a distant corner and disappeared from view, it suddenly occurred to Excalibur that he had been left behind. Accordingly he set off in pursuit. . . .

The Curate finally ran him to earth in Buckingham Palace Road, which is a long chase from Soho, sitting upon the pavement, to the grave inconvenience of the inhabitants of Pimlico, and refusing to be comforted. It took his new master the best part of an hour to get him to Euston Road, where it was discovered that they had missed the night mail to the North. Accordingly they walked to a rival station and took another train.

In all this Excalibur was the instrument of Destiny, as you shall hear.

VII

The coroner's jury were inclined at the time to blame the signalman, but the Board of Trade Inquiry established the fact that the accident was due to the driver's neglect to keep a proper look-out. However, as the driver was dead, and his fireman with him, the Law very leniently took no further action in the matter.

About three o'clock in the morning, as the train was crossing a bleak Yorkshire moor seven miles from Tetley Junction, the Curate suddenly left the seat upon which he lay stretched, dreaming of Eileen, and flew across the compartment on to the recumbent form of a stout commercial traveller. Then he rebounded on to the floor, and woke up—unhurt.

"'Tis a accident, lad!" gasped the commercial traveller, as he got his wind back.

"So it seems," said the Curate. "Hold tight! She's rocking!"

The commercial traveller, who was mechanically groping under the seat for his boots—commercial travellers always remove their boots in third-class railway compartments upon night journeys—followed the Curate's advice, and braced himself with feet against the opposite seat.

After the first shock the train had gathered way again—the light engine into which it had charged had been thrown clean off the track—but only for a moment. Suddenly the reeling engine of the express left the metals and staggered drunkenly along the ballast. A moment later it turned right over, taking

the guard's van and the first four coaches with it, and the whole train came to a standstill.

It was a corridor train; and unfortunately for Gerald Gilmore and the commercial traveller, their coach fell over corridor side downwards. There was no door upon the other side of the compartment—only three windows, crossed by a stout brass bar. These windows had suddenly become skylights.

They fought their way out at last. Once he had got the window open the Curate experienced little difficulty in getting through; but the commercial traveller was corpulent and tenacious of his boots, which he held persistently in one hand while Gerald tugged at the other. Still he was hauled up at last, and the two slid down the perpendicular roof of the coach on to the permanent way.

"That's done, anyway," panted the bagman, and sitting down he began to put on his boots.

"There's plenty more to do," said the Curate grimly, pulling off his coat. "The front of the train is on fire. Come!"

He turned and ran. Almost at his first step he cannoned into a heavy body in rapid motion. It was Excalibur.

"That you, old friend?" observed the Curate. "I was on my way to see about you. Now that you are out, you may as well come and bear a hand."

And the pair sprinted along the line towards the blazing coaches.

It was dawn—grey, weeping, and cheerless—on Tetley Moor. Another engine had come up behind to take what was left of the train back to the junction. Seven coaches, including the lordly sleeping-saloon,

stood intact; the other four, with the engine and tender, lay where they had fallen—a mass of charred wood and twisted metal. A motor-car belonging to a doctor stood in the roadway a hundred yards off, and its owner, together with a brother of the craft who had been a passenger in the train, were attending to the injured. There were fourteen of these altogether, mostly suffering from burns. These were made as comfortable as possible in the sleeping-berths, which their owners had vacated. Under a tarpaulin by the side of the permanent way lay three figures which would never feel pain again.

"Take your seats, please!" said the surviving guard in a subdued voice. He spoke at the direction of a big man in a heavy overcoat, who appeared to have taken charge of the salvage operations. The passengers clambered up into the train.

Only one delayed. He was a long, lean young man, black from head to foot with soot and oil. His left arm was badly burned, and seeing a doctor disengaged at last he came forward to have it dressed.

The big man in the heavy overcoat approached him.

"My name is Caversham," he said. "I happen to be a director of the Company. If you will give me your name and address, I will see to it that your services to-night are suitably recognised. The way you got those two children out of the first coach was splendid, if I may be allowed to say so. We did not even know they were there."

The young man's teeth suddenly flashed out into a white smile against the blackness of his face.

"Neither did I, sir," he said. "Let me introduce you to the responsible party."

He whistled. Out of the grey dawn loomed an eerie monster, heavily singed, wagging its tail.

"Scally, old man," said the Curate, "this gentleman wants to present you with an illuminated address. Thank him prettily!" Then to the doctor: "I'm ever so much obliged to you; it's quite comfortable now."

He began stiffly to pull on his coat and waistcoat. Lord Caversham, lending a hand, noted the waistcoat, and said quickly:

"Will you travel in my compartment? I should like to have a word with you, if I may?"

"I think I had better go and have a look at these poor folk in the sleeper first," replied the Curate. "They may require my services—professionally."

"At the Junction, then, perhaps?" suggested Lord Caversham.

But at the Junction the Curate found a special waiting to proceed north by a loop line; and being in no mind to receive compliments or waste his substance on a hotel bill, departed forthwith, taking his charred confederate, Excalibur, with him.

VIII

But Fortune, once she takes a fancy to you, is not readily shaken off, as most successful men are always trying to forget.

A fortnight later Lord Caversham, leaving his hotel in a great northern town—he combined the misfortunes of being both a director of the railway

company and a Cabinet Minister, and had spent a harassing fortnight attending inquests and explaining to fervent young counsel why he had not been present upon the footplate of the engine supervising the driver and fireman at the time of the accident—encountered an acquaintance whom he had no difficulty whatever in recognising.

It was Excalibur, jammed fast between two stationary tramcars—he had not yet shaken down to town life—submitting to a painful but effective process of extrication at the hands of a *posse* of policemen and tram-conductors, shrilly directed by a small but commanding girl of the lodging-house drudge variety.

When this enterprise had been brought to a successful conclusion, and the congested traffic moved on by the overheated policemen, Lord Caversham crossed the street and tapped the damsel upon the shoulder.

“Can you kindly inform me where the owner of that dog may be found?” he inquired politely.

“Yass. Se’nty-one Pilgrim Street. But ’e won’t sell ’im.”

“Should I be likely to find him at home if I called now?”

“Yass. Bin in bed since the eccident. Got a nasty arm.”

“Perhaps you would not mind accompanying me back to Pilgrim Street in my car.”

After that Mary Ellen’s mind became an incoherent blur. A stately limousine glided up: Mary Ellen was handed in by a footman, and Excalibur was stuffed in after her, in instalments. The grand gentleman entered by the opposite door and sat down

beside her ; but Mary Ellen was much too dazed to converse with him.

The arrival of the equipage in Pilgrim Street was the greatest moment of Mary Ellen's life. After the grand gentleman had disappeared within the dingy portals of Number Seventy-one in quest of Mr. Gilmore, Mary Ellen and Excalibur remained in the street, chaperoning the chauffeur and footman, and keeping the crowd at a proper distance.

Meanwhile, upstairs in the first floor front, the Curate, lying in his uncomfortable flock bed, was saying :

"If you really mean it, sir——"

"I do mean it. If those two children had been burned to death unnoticed I should never have forgiven myself, and the public would never have forgiven the Company."

"Well, sir, as you say that, you—well, you *could* do me a service. Could you possibly use your influence to get me a billet—I'm not asking for an incumbency : any old curacy would do—a billet I could marry on?" He flushed scarlet. "I—we have been waiting for a long time now."

There was a long silence, and the Curate wondered if he had been too mercenary in his request. Then Lord Caversham asked :

"What are you getting at present?"

"Two hundred a year."

This was about two-thirds of the salary which Lord Caversham paid his chauffeur. He asked another question, in his curious, abrupt, staccato manner :

"How much do you want?"

"We could make both ends meet on three hundred.

But another fifty would enable me to make her a lot more comfortable," said the Curate wistfully.

The great man surveyed him silently—wonderingly, too, if the Curate had known. Presently he said :

"Afraid of hard work?"

"No work is hard to a man with a wife and a home of his own," replied the Curate with simple fervour.

Lord Caversham smiled grimly. He had more homes of his own than he could conveniently live in, and he had been married three times. But even he found work hard now and then.

"I wonder!" he said. "Well, good afternoon. I should like to be introduced to your *fiancée* one day."

He walked briskly down the stairs and into the street. Mary Ellen, frustrating the footman, darted forward and flung open the door of the car with a magnificent flourish.

Excalibur, mistaking her intention, and anxious to oblige, promptly crawled in.

IX

A tramp opened the Rectory gate and shambled up the neat gravel walk towards the house. Taking a short cut through the shrubbery he emerged suddenly upon a little lawn.

Upon the lawn a lady was sitting in a basket-chair, beside a perambulator, whose occupant was slumbering peacefully. A small but intensely capable nursemaid, prone upon the grass in a curvilinear

attitude, was acting as a tunnel to a young gentleman of three who was impersonating a railway-train.

The tramp approached the group and asked huskily for alms. He was a burly and unpleasant specimen of his class—a class all too numerous on the outskirts of the great industrial parish of Smeltingborough.

The lady in the basket-chair looked up.

"The Rector is out," she said. "If you will go into the town you will find him at the Church Hall, and he will investigate your case."

"Oh, the Rector is out, is he?" repeated the tramp, in tones of distinct satisfaction.

"Yes," said Eileen.

The tramp advanced another pace.

"Give us half-a-crown," he said. "I haven't had a bite of food since yesterday, lady. Nor a drink neither," he added humorously.

"Please go away," said the lady. "You know where to find the Rector."

The tramp smiled unpleasantly, but made no attempt to move.

The railway-tunnel rose abruptly to its feet, and remarked with asperity:

"Now then, pop off!"

Even this had no effect. The lady looked up again.

"You refuse to go away?" she said.

"I'll go for half-a-crown," replied the tramp, with the gracious air of one anxious to oblige a lady.

"Watch baby for a moment, Mary Ellen," said Eileen.

She rose, and disappeared into the house, followed by the gratified smile of the tramp. He was a

reasonable man, and knew that ladies do not wear pockets.

"Thirsty weather," he remarked affably.

Mary Ellen, keeping one hand upon the shoulder of Master Gerald Caversham Gilmore and the other upon the edge of the baby's perambulator, merely chuckled sardonically.

Next moment there came the sound of footsteps round the corner of the house, and Eileen reappeared. She was clinging with both hands to the collar of an enormous dog. Its tongue lolled from its great jaws, its tail waved menacingly from side to side; its mighty limbs were bent, as if for a spring. Its eyes were half-closed, as if to focus the exact distance.

"Run!" cried Eileen to the tramp. "I can't hold him in much longer!"

This was true enough, except that when Eileen said "in" she meant "up."

But the tramp did not linger to discuss prepositions. There was a scurry of feet; the gate banged; and he was gone.

With a sigh of relief Eileen let go of Excalibur's collar. Excalibur promptly collapsed upon the grass and went to sleep again.

From "The Lucky Number."

VI

THE EBONY BOX

A. E. W. MASON

"N O, no," said Colonel von Altrock, abruptly.
"It is not always true."

The conversation died away at once, and every one about that dinner table in the Rue St. Florentin looked at him expectantly. He played nervously with the stem of his wineglass for a few moments, as though the complete silence distressed him. Then he resumed with a more diffident air:

"War no doubt inspires noble actions and brings out great qualities in men from whom you expected nothing. But there is another side to it which becomes apparent, not at once, but after a few months of campaigning. Your nerves get over-strained, fatigue and danger tell their tale. You lose your manners, sometimes you degenerate into a brute. I happen to know. Thirty years have passed since the siege of Paris, yet even to-day there is no part of my life which I regret so much as the hours between eleven and twelve o'clock of Christmas night in the year '70. I will tell you about it if you like, although the story may make us late for the opera."

The opera to be played that evening was "Faust," which most had heard, and the rest could hear when they would. On the other hand Colonel von Altrock was habitually a silent man. The offer which he

1. is a love story. 127

2. It is also a war story.

3. It is a love story.

4. The French Emperor, on finding an hour of leisure

made now he was not likely to repeat. It was due, as his companions understood, to the accident that this night was the first which he had spent in Paris since the days of the great siege.

"It will not matter if we are a little late," said his hostess, the Baroness Hammerstein, and her guests agreed with her.

"It is permitted to smoke?" asked the Colonel. For a moment the flame of a match lit up and exaggerated the hollows and the lines upon his lean rugged face. Then, drawing his chair to the table, he told his story.

I was a lieutenant of the fifth company of the second battalion of the 103rd Regiment, which belonged to the 23rd Infantry Division. It is as well to be exact. That division was part of the 12th Army Corps under the Crown Prince of Saxony, and in the month of December formed the south-eastern segment of our circle about Paris. On Christmas night I happened to be on duty at a forepost in advance of Noisy-le-Grand. The centigrade thermometer was down to twelve degrees below zero, and our little wooden hut with the sloping roof, which served us at once as kitchen, mess-room, and dormitory, seemed to us all a comfortable shelter. Outside its door the country glimmered away into darkness, a white silent plain of snow. Inside, the campbedsteads were neatly ranged along the wall where the roof was lowest. A long table covered with a white cloth—for we were luxurious on Christmas night—occupied the middle of the floor. A huge fire blazed up the chimney, chairs of any style, from a Louis

*The German soldiers during the siege of Paris
In the foreground a great pile of German arms and
ammunition.*

Quatorze fauteuil borrowed from the *salon* of a château to the wooden bench of a farm-house, were placed about the table, and in a corner stood a fine big barrel of Bavarian beer which had arrived that morning as a Christmas present from my mother at Leipzig. We were none of us anxious to turn out into the bitter cold, I can tell you. But we were not colonels in those days, and while the Hauptmann was proposing my mother's health the door was thrust open and an orderly muffled up to the eyes stood on the threshold at the salute.

"The Herr Oberst wishes to see the Herr Lieutenant von Altrock," said he, and before I had time even to grumble he turned on his heels and marched away.

I took down my great-coat, drew the cape over my head, and went out of the hut. There was no wind, nor was the snow falling, but the cold was terrible, and to me who had come straight from the noise of my companions the night seemed unnaturally still. I plodded away through the darkness. Behind me in the hut the Hauptmann struck up a song, and the words came to me quite clearly and very plaintively across the snow :

"Ich hatte einen Kamaraden,
Einen besseren findest du nicht." *

I wondered whether in the morning, like that comrade, I should be a man to be mentioned in the past tense. For more than once a sentinel had been found frozen dead at his post, and I foresaw a long night's work before me. My Colonel had acquired a habit of choosing me for special services, and indeed to his kindness in this respect I owed my commission.

9 * I had a friend, no better could you find.

For you must understand that I was a student at Heidelberg when the newsboys came running down the streets one evening in July with the telegram that M. Benedetti had left Ems. I joined the army as a volunteer, and I fought in the ranks at Gravelotte. However, I felt no gratitude to my Colonel that Christmas night as I tramped up the slope of Noisy-le-Grand to the château where he had his quarters.

I found him sitting at a little table drawn close to the fire in a bare, dimly-lighted room. A lamp stood on the table, and he was peering at a crumpled scrap of paper and smoothing out its creases. So engrossed was he, indeed, in his scrutiny that it was some minutes before he raised his head and saw me waiting for his commands.

"Lieutenant von Altrock," he said, "you must ride to Raincy."

Raincy was only five miles distant, as the crow flies. Yes, but the French had made a sortie on the 21st, they had pushed back our lines, and they now held Ville Evrart and Maison Blanche between Raincy and Noisy-le-Grand. I should have to make a circuit; my five miles became ten. I did not like the prospect at all. I liked it still less when the Colonel added:

"You must be careful. More than one German soldier has of late been killed upon that road. There are *francs-tireurs* about, and you *must* reach Raincy."

It was a verbal message which he gave me, and I was to deliver it in person to the commandant of the battery at Raincy. It bore its fruit upon the 27th, when the cross-fire from Raincy and Noisy-le-Grand destroyed the new French fort upon Mount Avron in a snowstorm.

"There is a horse ready for you at the stables," said the Colonel, and with a nod he turned again to his scrap of paper. I saluted and walked to the door. As my hand was on the knob he called me back.

"What do you make of it?" he asked, holding the paper out to me. "It was picked out of the Marne in a sealed wine-bottle."

I took the paper and saw that a single sentence was written upon it in a round and laborious hand with the words mis-spelt. The meaning of the sentence seemed simple enough. It was apparently a message from a M. Bonnet to his son in the Mobiles at Paris, and it stated that the big black sow had had a litter of fifteen.

"What do you make of it?" repeated the Colonel.

"Why, that M. Bonnet's black sow has farrowed fifteen," said I.

I handed the paper back. The Colonel looked at it again, shrugged his shoulders, and laughed.

"Well, after all, perhaps it does mean no more than that," said he.

But for the Colonel's suspicions I should not have given another thought to that mis-spelt scrawl. M. Bonnet was probably some little farmer engrossed in his pigs and cows, who thought that no message could be more consoling to his son locked up in Paris than this great news about the black sow. The Colonel's anxiety, however, fixed it for a while in my mind.

The wildest rumours were flying about our camp at that time, as I think will always happen when you have a large body of men living under a great strain of cold and privation and peril. They perplexed

the seasoned officers and they were readily swallowed by the youngsters, of whom I was one. Now, this scrap of paper happened to fit in with the rumour which most of all exercised our imaginations.

It was known that in spite of all our precautions news was continually leaking into Paris which we did not think it good for the Parisians to have. What we did think good for them—information, for instance, of the defeat of the Army of the Loire—we ourselves sent in without delay. But we ascertained from our prisoners that Paris was enlightened with extraordinary rapidity upon other matters which we wished to keep to ourselves. On that very Christmas Day they already knew that General Faidherbe, at Pont Noyelles, had repulsed a portion of our first army under General Manteuffel. How did they know? We were not satisfied that pigeons and balloons completely explained the mystery. No, we believed that the news passed somewhere through our lines on the south-east of Paris. There was supposed to exist a regular system like the underground road in the Southern States of America during the slavery days. There the escaped slave was quickly and secretly passed on from appointed house to appointed house, until he reached freedom. Here it was news in cipher which was passed on and on to a house close to our lines, whence, as occasion served, it was carried into Paris.

That was the rumour. There may have been truth in it, or it may have been entirely false. But, at all events, it had just the necessary element of fancy to appeal to the imagination of a very young man, and as I walked to the stables and mounted the horse

which the Colonel had lent me, I kept wondering whether this message, so simple in appearance, had travelled along that underground road and was covering its last stage between the undiscovered château and Paris in the sealed wine-bottle. I tried to make out what the black sow stood for in the cipher, and whose identity was concealed under the pseudonym of M. Bonnet. So I rode down the slope of Noisy-le-Grand.

But at the bottom of the slope these speculations passed entirely from my mind. In front, hidden away in the darkness, lay the dangers of Ville Evrart and Maison Blanche. German soldiers had ridden along this path and had not returned; the *francs-tireurs* were abroad. Yet I must reach Raincy. Moreover, in my own mind, I was equally convinced that I must return. I saw the little beds against the wall of the hut under the sloping roof. I rode warily, determined to sleep in one of them that night, determined to keep my life if it could be kept. I believe I should have pistoled my dearest friend without a tinge of remorse had he tried to delay me for a second. Three months of campaigning, in a word, had told their tale.

I crossed the Marne and turned off the road into a forest path. Ville Evrart with its French garrison lay now upon my left behind the screen of trees. Fortunately there was no moon that night, and a mist hung in the air. The snow, too, deadened the sound of my horse's hoofs. But I rode, nevertheless, very gently and with every sense alert. Each moment I expected the challenge of a sentinel in French. From any of the bushes which I passed I might suddenly

see the spurt of flame from a *franc-tireur's* *chassepot*. If a twig snapped in the frost at my side I was very sure the foot of an enemy was treading there.

I came to the end of the wood and rode on to Chesnay. Here the country was more open, and I had passed Ville Evrart. But I did not feel any greater security. I was possessed with a sort of rage to get my business done and live—yes, at all costs *live*. A mile beyond Chesnay I came to cross-roads, and within the angle which the two roads made a little cabin stood upon a plot of grass. I was in doubt which road to take. The cabin was all dark, and riding up to the door I hammered upon it with the butt of my pistol. It was not immediately opened. There must indeed have been some delay, since the inmates were evidently in bed. But I was not in any mood to show consideration. I wanted to get on—to get on and live. A little window was within my reach. I dashed the butt of the pistol violently through the glass.

“Will that waken you, eh?” I cried, and almost before I had finished I heard a shuffling footstep in the passage and the door was opened. A poor old peasant-woman, crippled with rheumatism, stood in the doorway shading a lighted candle with a gnarled, trembling hand. In her haste to obey she had merely thrown a petticoat over the shoulders of her nightdress, and there she stood with bare feet, shivering in the cold, an old bent woman of eighty, and apologised.

“I am sorry, monsieur,” she said, meekly. “But I cannot move as quickly as I could when I was young. How can I serve monsieur?”

Not a word of reproach about her broken window.

You would think that the hardest man must have felt some remorse. I merely broke in upon her apologies with a rough demand for information.

"The road upon your right leads to Chelles, monsieur," she answered. "That upon your left to Raincy."

I rode off without another word. It is not a pretty description which I am giving to you, but it is a true one. That is my regret—it is a true one. I forgot the old peasant woman the moment I had passed the cabin. I thought only of the long avenues of trees which stretched across that flat country, and which could hide whole companies of *francs-tireurs*. I strained my eyes forwards. I listened for the sound of voices. But the first voice which I heard spoke in my own tongue.

It was the voice of a sentry on the outposts of Raincy, and I could have climbed down from my saddle and hugged him to my heart. Instead, I sat impassively in my saddle and gave him the countersign. I was conducted to the quarters of the commandant of artillery and I delivered my message.

"You have come quickly," he said. "What road did you take?"

"That of Chesnay and Gagny."

The commandant looked queerly at me.

"Did you?" said he. "You are lucky. You will return by Montfermeil and Chelles, Lieutenant von Altrock, and I will send an escort with you. Apparently we are better informed at Raincy than you are at Noisy-le-Grand."

"I knew there was danger, sir," I replied.

A regiment of dragoons was quartered at Raincy,

and from it two privates and a corporal were given me for escort. In the company of these men I started back by the longer road in the rear of our lines. And it was a quarter to ten when I started. For I noticed the time of a clock in the commandant's quarters. I should think that it must have taken three-quarters of an hour to reach Montfermeil, for the snow was deep here and the mist very thick. Beyond Montfermeil, however, we came to higher ground; there were fewer drifts of snow, and the night began to clear, so that we made better going. We were now, of course, behind our lines, and the only risk we ran was that of a few peasants armed with rifles from a battlefield, or a small band of *francs-tireurs* might be lurking on the chance of picking off a straggler. But that risk was not very great now that there were four of us. I rode therefore with an easier mind, and the first thing which entered my thoughts was—what do you think? The old peasant-woman's cabin with the broken window? Not a bit of it. No, it was M. Bonnet's black sow. Had M. Bonnet's sow farrowed fifteen? Or was that litter of fifteen intended to inform the people in Paris by some system of multiplication of the exact number of recruits which had joined one of the French armies still in the field—say, General Faidherbe's, at Bapaume, and so to keep up their spirits and prolong the siege? I was still puzzling over this problem when in a most solitary place I came suddenly upon a château with lighted windows. This was the Château Villetaneuse. I reined in my horse and stopped. My escort halted behind me. It was after all an astonishing sight. There were

many châteaux about Paris then, as there are now, but not one that I had ever come across was inhabited by more than a caretaker. The owners had long since fled. Breached walls, trampled gardens, gaping roofs, and silence and desertion—that is what we meant when we spoke of a château near Paris in those days. But here was one with lighted windows on the first and second stories staring out calmly on the snow as though never a Prussian soldier had crossed the Rhine. A thick clump of trees sheltered it behind, and it faced the eastern side of the long ridge of Mont Guichet, along the foot of which I rode—the side farthest from Paris. From the spot where I and my escort had halted an open park stretched level to the door. The house had, no doubt, a very homelike look on that cold night. It should have spoken to me, no doubt, of the well-ordered family life and the gentle occupations of women. But I was thinking of M. Bonnet's black sow. I was certain that none of our officers were quartered there and making the best of their Christmas night in France. Had that been the case, black paths and ruts would have been trampled in the snow up to the door, and before now I should have been challenged by a sentinel. No! The more I looked at the house and its lighted windows, the more I thought of M. Bonnet's sow. Was this solitary château the undiscovered last station on the underground road through which the news passed into Paris? If not, why was it still inhabited? Why did the lights blaze out upon the snow so late?"

I commanded my escort to be silent. We rode

across the park, and half-way to the door we came upon a wire fence and a gate. There we dismounted, and walked our horses. We tethered them to a tree about twenty yards from the house. I ordered one of my dragoons to go round the house, and watch any door which he might find at the back. I told the other two to stay where they were, and I advanced alone to the steps, but before I had reached them the front door was thrown open, and a girl with a lantern in her hand came out.

She held the lantern high above her head and peered forward, so that the light fell full upon her hair, her face, and dress. She was a tall girl and slight of figure, with big, dark eyes, and a face pretty and made for laughter. It was very pale now, however, and the brows were drawn together in a frown. She wore a white evening frock, which glistened in the lantern light, and over her bare shoulders she had flung a heavy, black, military cloak. So she stood and swung the lantern slowly from side to side as she stared into the darkness, while the lights and shadows chased each other swiftly across her white frock, her anxious face, and the waves of her fair hair.

"Whom do you expect at this hour, mademoiselle?" I asked.

I was quite close to her, but she had not seen me, for I stood at the bottom of the steps and she was looking out over my head. Yet she did not start or utter any cry. Only the lantern rattled in her hand. Then she stood quite still for a moment or two, and afterwards lowered her arm until the light shone upon me.

"You are Prussian?" she said.

"A lieutenant of foot," I answered. "You have nothing to fear."

"I am not afraid," she replied, quietly.

"Yet you tremble, mademoiselle. Your hand shakes."

"That is the cold," said she.

"Whom did you expect?"

"No one," she replied. "I thought that I heard the rattle of iron as though a horse moved and a stirrup rang. It is lonely here since our neighbours have fled. I came out to see."

"The lantern then was not a signal, mademoiselle?" I asked.

She looked at me in perplexity, and certainly the little piece of acting, I thought, was very well done. Many a man might have been taken in by it. But it was thrown away upon me, for I had noticed that heavy military cloak. How did it come to lie so conveniently to her hand in the hall?

"A signal?" she repeated. "To whom?"

"To some man hiding in the woods of Mont Guichet, a signal to him that he may come and fetch the news for Paris that has lately—very lately—been brought to the house."

She bent forward and peered down at me, drawing the cloak closer about her neck.

"You are under some strange mistake, monsieur," she said. "No news for Paris has been brought to this house by anyone."

"Indeed?" I answered. "And is that so?" Then I stretched out my hand and said triumphantly: "You will tell me perhaps that the cloak upon your shoulders is a woman's cloak?"

And she laughed! It was humiliating; it is always humiliating to a young man not to be taken seriously, isn't it—especially if he is a conqueror? There was I thinking that I had fairly cross-examined her into a trap, and she laughed indulgently. Of course, a girl always claims the right to be ever so much older than a man of her own age, but she stood on the top of the steps and laughed down at me as though she had the advantage of as many years as there were steps between us. And she explained indulgently, too.

"The cloak I am wearing belongs to a wounded French officer who was taken prisoner and released upon parole. He is now in our house."

"Then I think I will make his acquaintance," I said, and over my shoulder I called to the corporal. As he advanced to my side a look of alarm came into the girl's face.

"You are not alone," she said, and suddenly her face became wistful and her voice began to plead. "You have not come for him? He has done no harm. He could not, even if he would. And he would not, for he has given his parole. Oh, you are not going to take him away?"

"That we shall see, mademoiselle."

I left one dragoon at the door. I ordered the corporal to wait in the hall, and I followed the girl up the stairs to the first floor. All her pride had gone; she led the way with a submission of manner which seemed to me only a fresh effort to quiet my suspicions. But they were not quieted. I distrusted her; I believed that I had under my fingers the proof of that rumour which flew about our camp.

She stopped at a door, and as she turned the handle she said :

"This is my own parlour, monsieur. We all use it now, for it is warmer than the others, and all our servants but one have fled."

It was a pretty room, and cheery enough to a young man who came into it from the darkness and the snow. A piano stood open in a corner with a rug thrown upon it to protect the strings from the cold ; books lay upon the tables, heavy curtains were drawn close over the windows, there were cushioned sofas and deep arm-chairs, and a good fire of logs blazed upon the hearth. These details I took in at once. Then I looked at the occupants. A youth lay stretched upon a sofa close to the fire with a wrap covering his legs. The wrap was raised by a cradle to keep off its weight. His face must have been, I think, unusually handsome, when he had his health ; at the moment it was so worn and pale, and the eyes were so sunk, that all its beauty had gone. The pallor was accentuated by a small black moustache he wore and his black hair. He lay with his head supported upon a pillow, and was playing a game of chess with an old lady who sat at a little table by his side. This old lady was actually making a move as I entered the room, for as she turned and stared at me she was holding a chessman in her hand. I advanced to the fire and warmed my hands at it.

"You, sir, are the wounded officer on parole?" I said in French. The officer bowed.

"And you, madame?" I asked of the old lady. The sight of my uniform seemed to have paralysed her with terror. She sat still holding the chessman

in her hand, and staring at me with her mouth half-open.

"Come, come, madame," I explained, impatiently; "it is a simple question."

"Monsieur, you frighten her," said the young lady. "It is my aunt, the Baroness Granville."

"You tell me nothing of yourself," I said to her, and she looked at me in surprise.

"Since you have come with an escort to this house I imagined you must know to whom it belonged. I am Sophie de Villetaneuse."

"Exactly," I replied, as though I had known all along, and had merely asked the question to see whether she would speak the truth. "Now, mademoiselle, will you please explain to me how it is that while your neighbours have fled you remain at your château?"

"It is quite simple," she answered. "My mother is bedridden. She could not be moved. She could not be left alone."

"You will pardon me," said I, "if I test the statement."

The wounded officer raised himself upon his elbow as though to protest, but Mademoiselle de Villetaneuse put out a hand and checked him. She showed me a face flushed with anger, but she spoke quite quietly.

"I will myself take you to my mother's room."

I laughed. I said: "That is just what I expected. You will take me to your mother's room and leave your friends here to make any little preparations in the way of burning awkward letters which they may

think desirable. Thank you, no! I am not so easily caught."

Mademoiselle Sophie was becoming irritated.

"There are no awkward letters!" she exclaimed.

"That statement, too, I shall put to the test."

I went to the door, and standing so that I could still keep an eye upon the room, I called the corporal.

"You will search the house thoroughly," I said, "and quickly. Bring me word how many people you find in it. You, mademoiselle, will remain in the room with us."

She shrugged her shoulders as I closed the door and came back into the room.

"You were wounded, monsieur," I said to the Frenchman. "Where?"

"In the sortie on Le Bourget."

"And you came here the moment you were released on your parole?"

The wounded officer turned with a smile to Mademoiselle Sophie.

"Yes, for here live my best friends."

He took her hand, and with a Frenchman's grace he raised it to his lips and kissed it. And I was suddenly made acquainted with the relationship in which these two, youth and maid, stood to one another. Mademoiselle Sophie had cried out on the steps against the possibility that I might have come to claim my prisoner. But though she spoke no word, she was still more explicit now. With the officer that caress was plainly no more than a pretty way of saying thanks; it had the look of a habit, it was so neatly given, and he gave it without carelessness, it is true, but without warmth. She, however, received it very

differently. He did not see, because his head was bent above her hand, but I did.

I saw the look of pain in her face, the slight contraction of her shoulders and arms, as if to meet a blow. The kiss hurt her—no, not the kiss, but the finished grace with which it was given, the proof, in a word, that it was a way of saying "Thanks"—and nothing more. Here was a woman who loved and a man who did not love, and the woman knew. So much was evident to me who looked on, but when the officer raised his head there was nothing for him to see, and upon her lips only the conventional remark :

"We should have been hurt if you had not come."

I resumed my questions :

"Your doctor, monsieur, is in the house ?"

"At this hour ? No."

"Ah. That is a pity."

The young man lifted his head from his pillow and looked me over from head to foot with a stare of disdain.

"I do not quite understand. You doubt my word, monsieur ?"

"Why not ?" I asked sharply.

It was quite possible that the cradle, this rug across his legs, the pillow, were all pretences. Many a soldier in those days was pale and worn and had sunken eyes, and yet was sound of limb and could do a day's work of twenty-four hours if there were need. I had my theory and as yet I had come upon nothing to disprove it. This young officer might very well have brought in a cipher message to the Château Villeteuse. Mademoiselle Sophie might very well

have waved her lantern at the door to summon a fresh messenger.

"No; why should I not doubt your word?" I repeated.

He turned his face to the old lady. "It is your move, Baronne," he said, and she placed the piece she held upon a square of the board. Mademoiselle Sophie took her stand by the table between the players, and the game went on just as though there were no intruder in the room. It was uncomfortable for me. I shifted my feet. I tried to appear at my ease; finally I sat down in a chair. They took no notice of me whatever. But that I felt hot upon a discovery, but that I knew if I could bring back to Noisy-le-Grand proof of where the leakage through our lines occurred, I should earn approval and perhaps promotion, I should very deeply have regretted my entrance into the Château Villetaneuse. And I was extremely glad when at last the corporal opened the door. He had searched the house—he had found no one but Madame de Villetaneuse and an old servant who was watching by her bed.

"Very well," said I, and the corporal returned to the hall.

Mademoiselle Sophie moved away from the chess-table. She came and stood opposite to me, and though her face was still, her eyes were hard with anger.

"And now perhaps you will tell me to what I owe your visit?" she said.

"Certainly," I returned. I fixed my eyes on her, and I said slowly, "I have come to ask for more news of M. Bonnet's black sow."

Mademoiselle Sophie stared as if she were not sure whether I was mad or drunk, but was very sure I was one or the other. The young Frenchman started upon his couch, with the veins swelling upon his forehead and a flushed face.

"This is an insult," he cried savagely, and no less savagely I answered him.

"Hold your tongue!" I cried. "You forget too often that though you are on parole you are still a prisoner."

He fell back upon the sofa with a groan of pain, and the girl hurried to his side.

"Your leg hurts you. You should not have moved," she cried.

"It is nothing," he said faintly.

Meanwhile I had been looking about the room for a box or a case where the cipher messages might be hid. I saw nothing of the kind. Of course they might be hidden between the pages of a book. I went from table to table, taking them by the boards and shaking the leaves. Not a scrap of paper tumbled out. There was another door in the room besides that which led on to the landing.

"Mademoiselle, what room is that?" I asked.

"My bedroom," she answered, simply, and with a gesture full of dignity she threw open the door.

I carried the mud and snow and the grime of a camp without a scruple of remorse into that neat and pretty chamber. Mademoiselle Sophie followed me as I searched wardrobe and drawer and box. At last I came to one drawer in her dressing-table which was locked. I tried the handle again to make sure. Yes, it was locked. I looked suddenly at the young lady.

She was watching me out of the corners of her eyes with a peculiar intentness. I felt at once that I was hot.

"Open that drawer, mademoiselle," I said.

"It contains only some private things."

"Open that drawer or I burst it open."

"No," she cried, as I jerked the handle. "I will open it."

She fetched the key out of another drawer which was unlocked, and fitted it into the lock of the dressing-table. And all the while I saw that she was watching me. She meant to play me some trick, I was certain. So I watched too, and I did well to watch. She turned the key, opened the drawer, and then snatched out something with extraordinary rapidity and ran as hard as she could to the door—not the door through which we had entered, but a second door which gave on to the passage. She ran very fast and she ran very lightly, and she did not stumble over a chair as I did in pursuit of her. But she had to unlatch the door and pull it open. I caught her up and closed my arms about her. It was a little, carved, ebony box which she held, the very thing for which I searched.

"I thought so," I cried with a laugh. "Drop the box, mademoiselle. Drop it on the floor!"

The noise of our struggle had been heard in the next room. The Baroness rushed through the doorway.

"What has happened?" she cried. "Mon Dieu! you are killing her!"

"Drop the box, mademoiselle!"

And as I spoke she threw it away. She threw it through the doorway; she tried to throw it over the

banisters of the stairs, but my arms were about hers, and it fell into the passage just beyond the door. I darted from her and picked it up. When I returned with it she was taking a gold chain from her neck. At the end of the chain hung a little golden key. This she held out to me.

"Open it here," she said in a low, eager voice.

The sudden change only increased my suspicions, or rather my conviction that I had now the proof which I needed. A minute ago she was trying as hard as she could to escape with the box, now she was imploring me to open it.

"Why, if you are so eager to show me the contents, did you try to throw it away?" I asked.

"I tried to throw it down into the hall," she answered.

"My corporal would have picked it up."

"Oh, what would that matter?" she exclaimed, impatiently. "You would have opened it in the hall. That was what I wanted. Open it here! At all events open it here!"

The very urgency of her pleading made me determined to refuse the plea.

"No, you have some other ruse, mademoiselle," said I. "Perhaps you wish to gain time for your friend in the next room. No, we will return there and open it comfortably by the fire."

I kept a tight hold upon the box. I shook it. To my delight I felt that there were papers within it. I carried it back to the fireside and sat down on a chair. Mademoiselle Sophie followed me close, and as I fixed the little gold key into the lock she laid her hand very gently upon my arm.

"I beg you not to unlock that box," she said; "if you do you will bring upon me a great humiliation and upon yourself much remorse. There is nothing there which concerns you. There are just my little secrets. A girl may have secrets, monsieur, which are sacred to her."

She was standing quite close to me, and her back was towards the French officer and her aunt. They could not see her face and they could hardly have heard more than a word here and there of what she said. For always she spoke in a low voice, and at times that low voice dropped to a whisper, so that I myself had to watch her lips. I answered her only by turning the key in the lock. She took her hand from my arm and laid it on the lid to hinder me from opening it.

"I wore the key on a chain about my neck, monsieur," she whispered. "Does that teach you nothing? Even though you are young, does it teach you nothing? I said that if you unlocked that box you would cause me great humiliation, thinking that would be enough to stop you. But I see I must tell you more. Read the letters, monsieur, question me about them, and you will make my life a very lonely one. I think so. I think you will destroy my chance of happiness. You would not wish that, monsieur? It is true that we are enemies, but some day this war will end, and you would not wish to prolong its sufferings beyond the end. Yet you will be doing that, monsieur, if you open that box. You would be sorry afterwards when you were back at home to know that a girl in France was suffering from a needless act of yours. Yes, you will be sorry if you open that box."

It seems now almost impossible to me that I could have doubted her sincerity ; she spoke with so much simplicity, and so desperate an appeal looked out from her dark eyes. Ever since that Christmas night I can see her quite clearly at will, standing as she stood then—all the sincerity of her which I would not acknowledge, all the appeal which I would not hear ; and I see her many times when for my peace I would rather not. Much remorse, she said very wisely, would be the consequence for me. She was pleading for her pride, and to do that the better she laid her pride aside ; yet she never lost her dignity. She was pleading for her chance of happiness, foreseeing that it was likely to be destroyed, without any reason or any profit to a living being, by a stranger who would the next moment pass out of her life. Yet there was no outcry, and there were no tears. Had it been a trick—I ask the ladies—would there not have been tears ?

But I thought it was a trick and a cheap one. She was trying to make me believe that there were love-letters in the box—compromising love-letters. Now I *knew* that there were no love-letters in the box. I had seen the Frenchman's pretty way of saying thanks. I had noticed how the caress hurt her just through what it lacked. He was the friend, you see, and nothing more ; she was the lover and the only lover of the pair. There could be no love-letters in the box unless she had written them herself and kept them. But I did not think she was the girl to do that. There was a dignity about her which would have stopped her pen.

I opened the box accordingly. Mademoiselle

Sophie turned away abruptly, and sitting down in a chair shaded her eyes with her hand. I emptied the letters out on to a table, turning the box upside down, and thus the first which I took up and read was the one which lay at the very bottom. As I read it it seemed that every suspicion I had formed was established. She had hinted at love letters, she had spoken of secrets sacred to a girl; and the letter was not even addressed to her. It was addressed to Madame de Villetaneuse; it was a letter which, if it meant no more than what was implied upon the surface, would have long since found destruction in the waste-paper basket. For it purported to be merely the acceptance of an invitation to dinner at the town house of Madame de Villetaneuse in the Faubourg St. Germain. It was signed only by a Christian name, "Armand," and the few sentences which composed the letter explained that M. Armand was a distant kinsman of Madame de Villetaneuse who had just come to Paris to pursue his studies, and who, up till now, had no acquaintance with the family.

I looked at Mademoiselle Sophie sternly. "So all this pother was about a mere invitation to dinner! Once let it be known that M. Armand will dine with Madame de Villetaneuse in the Faubourg St. Germain, and you are humiliated, you lose your chance of happiness, and I, too, shall find myself in good time suffering the pangs of remorse," and I read the letter slowly aloud to her, word by word.

She returned no answer. She sat with her hand shading her face, and she rocked her head backwards and forwards continually and rather quickly, like a child with a racking headache. Of course, to my mind

all that was part of the game. The letter was dated two years back, but the month was December, and, of course, to antedate would be the first precaution.

"Come, mademoiselle," I said, changing my tone, "I invite you very seriously to make a clean breast of it. I wish to take no harsh measures with you if I can avoid them. Tell me frankly what news this letter plainly translated gives to General Trochu in Paris."

"None," she answered.

"Very well," said I, and I took up the next letter. Ah, M. Armand writes again a week later. It was evidently a good dinner and M. Armand is properly grateful."

The gratitude, indeed, was rather excessive, rather provincial. It was just the effusion which a young man who had not yet learned self-possession might have written on his first introduction to the highest social life of Paris. Certainly the correspondence was very artfully designed. But what did it hide? I puzzled over the question; I took the words and the dates, and it seemed to me that I began to see light. So much stress was laid upon the dinner, that the word must signify some event of importance. The first letter spoke of a dinner in the future. I imagined that it had not been possible to pass this warning into Paris. The second letter mentioned with gratitude that the dinner had been successful. Well, suppose "dinner" stood for "engagement"! The letter would refer to the sortie from Paris which pushed back our lines and captured Ville Evrart and Maison Blanche. That seemed likely. Madame de Villetaneuse gave the dinner; General Trochu made

the sortie. Then "Madame de Villetaneuse" stood for "General Trochu." Who would be Armand? Why, the French people outside Paris—the provincials! I had the explanation of that provincial expression of gratitude. Ah, no doubt it all seems far-fetched now that we sit quietly about this table. But put yourselves in the thick of war and take twenty years off your lives! Suppose yourselves young and green, eager for advancement, and just off your balance for want of sleep, want of food, want of rest, what of everything, and brutal from the facts of war. There are very few things which would seem far-fetched. It seemed to me that I was deciphering these letters with absolute accuracy. I saw myself promoted to captain, second to the General Staff. M. Armand represented the French people in the provinces. No doubt they would be grateful for that sortie. The only point which troubled me arose from M. Armand's presence at that dinner-party. Now, the one defect from the French point of view in that sortie on Ville Evrart was that the French outside Paris did not come to General Trochu's help. They were expected, but they did not take part in that dinner-party.

I went on with the letters, hoping to find an explanation there. The third letter was addressed to Mademoiselle de Villetaneuse, who had evidently written to M. Armand on behalf of her mother, inviting him to her box at the Opera. M. Armand regretted that he had not been fortunate enough to call at a time when Mademoiselle was at home, and would look forward to the pleasure of seeing her at the Opera. Was that an apology? I asked myself.

An apology for absence at Ville Evrart and a pledge to be present at the next engagement !

"Mademoiselle," I cried, "what does the Opera stand for ?"

Mademoiselle Sophie laughed disdainfully.

"For music, monsieur, for art, for refinement, for many things you do not understand."

I sprang up in excitement. What did it matter what she said ? M. Armand stood for the Army of the Loire. It was that army which had been expected at Ville Evrart. Here was a pledge that it would be reformed, that it would come to the help of Paris at the next sortie. That was valuable news—it could not but bring recognition to the man who brought evidence of it into the Prussian lines. I hurriedly read through the other letters, quoting a passage here and there, trying to startle Mademoiselle de Villetaneuse into a confession. But she never changed her attitude, she did not answer a word.

Her conduct was the more aggravating, for I began to get lost among these letters. They were all in the same handwriting ; they were all signed "Armand," and they seemed to give a picture of the life of a young man in Paris during the two years which preceded the war. They recorded dinner-parties, visits to the theatres, examinations passed, prizes won and lost, receptions, rides in the Bois, and Sunday excursions into the country. All these phrases, these appointments, these meetings, might have particular meanings. But if so, how stupendous a cipher ! Besides, how was it that none of these messages had been passed into Paris ? Very reluctantly I began to doubt my own conjecture. I read

some more letters, and then I suddenly turned back to the earlier ones. I compared them with the later notes. I began to be afraid the correspondence after all was genuine, for the tone of the letters changed and changed so gradually, and yet so clearly, that the greatest literary art could hardly have deliberately composed them. I seemed to witness the actual progress of M. Armand, a hobbledehoy from the provinces losing his awkwardness, acquiring ease and polish in his contact with the refinement of Paris. Gratitude was now expressed without effusion, he was no longer gaping with admiration at the elegance of the women, a knowledge of the world began to show itself in his comments. M. Armand was growing master of himself; he had gained a facility of style and a felicity of phrase. The last letters had the postmark of Paris, the first that of Auvergne.

They were genuine, then. And they were not love-letters. I looked at Mademoiselle Sophie with an increased perplexity. Why did she now sit rocking her head like a child in pain? Why had she so struggled to hinder me from opening them? They recorded a beginning of acquaintanceship and the growth of that into friendship between a young man and a young girl—nothing more. The friendship might eventually end in marriage no doubt if left to itself, but there was not a word of that in the letters. I was still wondering, when the French officer raised himself from his sofa and dragged himself across the room to Mademoiselle Sophie's chair. His left trouser leg had been slit down the side from the knee to the foot and laced lightly to as to make room for a bandage. He supported himself from chair to

chair with evident pain, and I could not doubt that his wound was as genuine as the letters.

He bent down and gently took her hand away from her face.

"Sophie," he said, "I did not dare to think that you kept this place for me in your thoughts. A little more courage and I should long since have said to you what I say now. I beg your permission to ask Madame de Villeteuse to-morrow for your hand in marriage."

My house of cards tumbled down in a second. The French officer was M. Armand. With the habit women have of treasuring tokens of the things which have happened, Mademoiselle Sophie had kept all these trifling notes and messages, and had even gathered to them the letters written by him to her mother, so that the story might be complete. But without M. Armand's knowledge; he was not to know; her pride must guard her secret from him. For she was the lover and he only the friend, and she knew it. Even in the little speech which he had just made, there was just too much formality, just too little sincerity of voice. I understood why she had tried to throw the ebony box down into the hall so that I might open it there—I understood that I had caused her great humiliation. But that was not all there was for me to understand.

In answer to Armand she raised her eyes quietly, and shook her head.

"You wish to spare me shame," she said, "and I thank you very much. But it is because of these letters that you spoke. I must think that. I must always think it."

"No!" he exclaimed.

"But, yes," she replied, firmly. "If monsieur had not unlocked that box—I don't know—but some day perhaps—oh, not yet, no, not yet—but some day perhaps you might have come of your own accord and said what you have just said. And I should have been very happy. But now you never must. For you see I shall always think that the letters are prompting you."

And M. Armand bowed.

I had taken from her her chance of happiness. The friendship between them might have ended in marriage if left to itself. But I had not left it to itself.

"Mademoiselle," I said, "I am very sorry."

She turned her dark eyes on me.

"Monsieur, I warned you. It is too late to be sorry," and as I stood shuffling awkwardly from one foot to the other, she added, gently, "Will you not go, monsieur?"

I went out of the room, called together my escort, mounted and rode off. It was past midnight now, and the night was clear. But I thought neither of the little beds under the slope of the roof nor of any danger on the road. There might have been a *franc-tireur* behind every tree. I would never have noticed it until one of them had brought me down. Remorse was heavy upon me. I had behaved without consideration, without chivalry, without any manners at all. I had not been able to distinguish truth when it stared me in the face, or to recognise honesty when it looked out from a young girl's dark eyes. I had behaved, in a word, like the brute six months of war had made of me. I wondered with a vague hope

whether after all time might not set matters right between M. Armand and Mademoiselle Sophie. And I wonder now whether it has. But even if I knew that it had, I should always remember that Christmas night of 1870 with acute regret. The only incident, indeed, which I can mention with the slightest satisfaction is this: On the way back to Noisy-le-Grand I came to a point where the road from Chelles crossed the road from Montfermeil. I halted at a little cabin which stood upon a grass-plot within the angle of the roads, and tying up all the money I had on me in a pocket-handkerchief I dropped the handkerchief through a broken window-pane.

The Colonel let the end of his cigar fall upon his plate and pushed back his chair from the table. "But I see we shall be late for the opera," he said, as he glanced at the clock.

From "The Four Corners of the World."

